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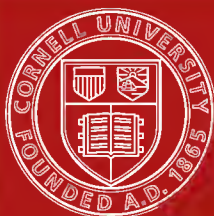
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THE REAL . .
OSCAR WILDE



“ OSCAR ”

(*Vanity Fair* cartoon by “Apey,” May 24th, 1884.)

THE REAL OSCAR WILDE

BY

ROBERT HARBOROUGH SHERARD

Author of "The Life of Oscar Wilde"

WITH NUMEROUS UNPUBLISHED
LETTERS, FACSIMILES, POR-
TRAITS AND ILLUSTRATIONS



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"It is beginning to be realised, it seems, that Wilde's contributions to English letters are, perhaps, the most remarkable furnished by any writer of his generation, with the possible exception of Stevenson, and that he was one of the most brilliantly gifted literary men that England ever produced."

Dr ERNEST BENDZ in "The Influence of Pater and Matthew Arnold in the Prose-Writings of Oscar Wilde."

L. B. B. B.

TO
E. D. K.

“When all around grew drear and dark,
And reason half withheld her ray—

.
.

Thou wert the solitary star
Which rose and set not to the last.”

FOREWORD

IN the course of the trial of the unsuccessful libel action brought by Lord Alfred Douglas against Arthur Ransome and *The Times* Book Club in April, 1913, the plaintiff being in the witness-box, my name having arisen, Mr Justice Darling asked :

“ Who is Mr Sherard ? ”

“ Oh ! he’s a journalist,” said Lord Alfred, and pointing at me, where, as a witness subpoenaed on behalf of the defendants, I was sitting, overwhelmingly bored and disgusted, in the body of the Court, he added : “ That’s *him* (*sic*). He’s sitting there. I have lent him money. I have the greatest possible contempt for him. He writes books on Oscar Wilde. He is always writing books on Oscar Wilde. He does nothing else. It is, I believe, his sole source of income.”

This sally amused me because already at that time I was projecting to write another book about my late friend, not indeed as a source of income, but prompted by some remarks of the Swedish professor, Doctor Ernest Bendz,

Foreword

whose opinion of Oscar Wilde's place in English letters is quoted on the title-page of this work. In the same treatise from which that opinion is taken, he refers to my writings on my late friend as follows:—"Mr Sherard's books are universally known and need no further mention here. His great *Life of Oscar Wilde* (Werner Laurie—1906), *though it may not quite satisfy us on all points*, still remains our chief source of information concerning the external facts of the poet's life." The italics are mine, and all I have to say as to why, *pace* Alfred Douglas, I am writing a second book on Oscar Wilde¹ is that I am prompted to do so by the criticism conveyed in the words italicised.

ROBERT H. SHERARD.

¹ My *Life of Oscar Wilde*, published in 1906 by Mr Werner Laurie, had, it is true, been preceded in 1902 by a brochure entitled: *The Story of an Unhappy Friendship*. But this book, which was privately printed, was in no sense of the word a biography. My subject was subjectively treated; it was a description of Wilde "seen through a temperament," my own. The Werner Laurie book was my first book on Wilde—the present work is the second.

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THE REAL OSCAR WILDE

CHAPTER I

Oscar Wilde's Date of Birth—As to his Posing as Young—An Anecdote of Lord Alfred Douglas's—*Le Beau Jeune Homme*—His Impressions of Passy—My First Letters from Oscar Wilde—The Editor, the Baronne and the Process-Server—Oscar Wilde and Cotsford Dick—His Preference for Young Companions—His Indifference to Social Distinctions—A Supper at the Garrick Club.

WHEN, on 3rd April 1895, at the trial of John Sholto Douglas, eighth Marquess of Queensberry, who was being prosecuted at the Old Bailey for an alleged criminal libel upon Mr Oscar Wilde, the prosecutor's examination-in-chief had been concluded by a most emphatic denial of the truth of any one of the many allegations which had been made by the defence in justification of the libel, Mr Edward Carson (as he then was), who was leading counsel for Lord Queensberry, rose to cross-examine, his first question bore on the date of Oscar Wilde's birth. He spoke as follows :—

“ You stated that your age was thirty-nine.

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member that I sent him a pneumatic telegram, in which, as sole reply to his upbraidings, I wrote the French saying: *Les absents ont toujours tort*. He tried in his paradoxical way to establish that people who live in remote suburbs and who have friends in the metropolis who are likely to come to see them have no right whatever at any time to absent themselves from their homes. With reference to his expedition itself he said that Passy might best be described as a place, driving to which the cabman would get down every five minutes to ask for something on account of his *pourboire*. The letter, which was one of the first I received from him, and which I remember was addressed to the "Citoyen Sherard," was many years ago, with other papers of mine, stolen from my house in Paris, at a time when being frequently seen in attendance at General Boulanger's house, or in the company of his friends and adherents, such as Henri Rochefort, Chincholle and members of the Royalist party, I had come under the suspicion of the French political police. There were other letters from Wilde in the bundle of papers which some zealous *mouchard*, no doubt, abstracted. I never ceased to regret their loss, for they were so characteristic of the man as he was in those days of his new



SIR WILLIAM WILDE AS A YOUNG MAN.



SIR WILLIAM WILDE.



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incarnation, when, æstheticism jettisoned, he was sailing with a fair wind to a land of promise. Perhaps I regretted them most at the time when I came to write what Dr Bendz calls my "great Life of Oscar Wilde," because as documents they would have been most illuminative of the man's psychology at the period referred to. And then, by the irony of things, after the book had been published, I heard of my missing letters—just about twenty years after they had vanished. I was on the Riviera at the time, and one day received from the editor of an important review published in Berlin a letter asking me if I had authorised a certain Baronne X., residing in Paris, to traffic with several letters written to me in 1883 by Oscar Wilde. The editor said that in view of the colossal interest that was being taken at that time in Germany in Oscar Wilde, and in everything he had ever written, he would have only been too pleased to purchase this correspondence, even at the exorbitant price asked for the letters by the Baronne, but that he thought it his duty to ask me what I knew about the matter before concluding the bargain. A few days later I further received a letter from her ladyship herself. She informed me that she had found these letters at one of the bookshops on the Quai Voltaire.

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She had purchased them and was anxious—merely for the sake of Oscar Wilde's greater glory—as a specimen of his *beau style épistolaire*, to give them to the world *par l'entremise* of a leading German periodical. My authorisation, however, was necessary to enable her to accomplish this act of filial, literary piety. As I had been forewarned as to her real motives, I vouchsafed no other answer to this letter than an *exploit*, or notice, from a *huissier* at Cannes, warning her that the letters were stolen property and that any use of them would bring down upon her all the terrors of the penal code. I remember that the name of the *huissier* or process-server was a sonorous one: Maître Tixador. He charged me a louis for the *exploit* and promised me to draw it up in a proper fashion, *quelque chose de soignée*, he said. It must have been particularly *soignée*, for from that day to this I have never heard of the Baronne again, nor have these letters ever been published. Possibly her ladyship concluded a deal with some merchant in autographs, and if so—as the value of Wilde autographs goes nowadays—must have realised at least five times the sum which the Berlin editor looked upon as an exorbitant amount.

If I never once heard *le beau jeune homme*—

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as the writer of these letters was described by my porter at Passy—vaunt youthfulness for himself, in common with all who knew him I was aware of his admiration of youth. His writings abound in allusions to his preference for young people to those whom in one of his plays he spoke of as “of the usual age.” The *homme d'un certain âge*, as the middle-aged man is described in France, was, perhaps unfairly, censured by Wilde as necessarily tedious. I remember pointing out to him that one man *d'un certain âge*, and indeed beyond it, who used to speak of himself as “us youth,” the immortal Falstaff, to wit, was anything but a very tedious personality. And all that Wilde could find to answer was: “Oh yes, Falstaff—Falstaff. But then he was a genius. And besides, he was a villain, and those whom the gods hate die old.”

His preference for young people would exact no such lengthy exposition as has been given to it here, if it had not been cast up against him for offence and suspicion both before his trials and in their course. There is no doubt that the fact that he was rarely seen about town in other society but that of very young men was malevolently commented upon both in London and in Paris, and contributed to the volume of

The Real Oscar Wilde

prejudice by which in 1895, far more than by anything which was satisfactorily proved against him, he was overwhelmed. In which connection I remember entering the Café Royal one evening with a somewhat priggish person, who, like many Englishmen of his class, was only too ready to condemn.

“ Oh,” I said, “ there’s Oscar Wilde over there. Come over to his table and I will introduce you to him.”

“ Oh no, thank you,” he said. “ I shouldn’t mind so much if he were alone. But he has got a youth with him, and if there’s anything in the world that bores me, it is the conversation of your cocksure young man. Give me maturity, I say, at all times.”

“ A youth, that ! ” I cried. “ Why, that’s Cotsford Dick.”

At that time Cotsford Dick, wit and poet, was considerably over forty years old. He certainly, under artificial light and at a distance, could be taken for twenty years younger.

His fondness for young people was over and over again cast up against him during his three trials with tedious insistence. Such a question as “ Did you know So-and-So ? ” would, on an affirmative reply having been given, immediately be followed by “ How old was he ? ”

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On one occasion, on 4th April, during the Queensberry trial, Mr Carson asks him as to various of his acquaintances: "Were all these young men about twenty?" and he answers quite frankly: "Yes, twenty or twenty-one." And he adds: "I like the society of young men." A little later on, referring to a particular person, Mr Carson asks again: "How old was he?" and Wilde, who was getting rather hipped at this line of cross-examination, retorts: "Really I do not keep a census." Carson says: "Never mind about a census. Tell me how old he was." The answer is: "I should say he was about twenty. He was young and that was one of his attractions." A few minutes later Wilde formulated his creed in the following words:—"I delight in the society of people much younger than myself. I like those who may be called idle and careless. I recognise no social distinctions at all of any kind; and to me youth, the mere fact of youth, is so wonderful that I would sooner talk to a young man for half-an-hour than be even—well, cross-examined in Court."

At the last trial, in answer to a question from Sir Frank Lockwood (previously one of his friends), he told "Mr Solicitor" that he preferred the companionship of young people

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because " I like to be liked. I liked their society simply because I like to be lionised."

An unprejudiced jury would have taken that answer as an all-sufficient explanation—especially a jury with any understanding of that particular and almost pathetic vanity of the literary *gens*. Writers want praise, hunger for it, thirst for it, and the spectacle of Oscar Wilde pontifying before youth not of his social standing should in justice have suggested no more evil than that of Molière reading his manuscripts to his cook and delighting in her approbation.

Indeed Mr Justice Wills, whose summing up was a fairly impartial one, pointed out to the jury how unfair it would be to follow the suggestion of the prosecution and to find culpability in the fact of Wilde's fondness for youthful companions. He might have gone further and have pointed out that any man of the world would as a matter of course be aware of the unclean suspicions which such frequentations would arouse in London and that no sane man, having evil intentions, would allow such frequentations to be a matter of public knowledge. People in London are so inclined to conceive evil that, as a metropolitan magistrate pointed out the other day, it is a matter of extreme danger for any paternally-minded man to speak or

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offer a little present to a small girl in the streets or parks, and anybody whom the sight of a pretty child arouses to interest and benevolence must have realised this danger from the umbrageous glances which he has encountered and the rumour of suspicion which he has overheard.

Oscar Fingall O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Dublin on 14th October 1854. I have always understood on his own authority that this event took place at No 1 Merrion Square, the fine house at the corner of Lincoln's Place, which was both the residence and the consulting-place of his distinguished father, William Robert Wills Wilde, who was one of the most celebrated eye and ear doctors of his age, who enjoyed a European reputation and who, for his great services to medical science as well as to literature, was in 1863 knighted by the Viceroy, Lord Carlisle.

In his unworthy book *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, Lord Alfred Douglas ridicules Wilde's observation in *De Profundis* that he had inherited "a noble name." He does much more; he points to this claim as a proof of the charge of snobbishness which he urges against his former friend. Now albeit "Wilde" is a noble name, and belongs to a family in the peerage, it is obvious that it was not that kind of nobility to which the author

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of *De Profundis* referred. He meant that the name he had inherited had been distinguished and ennobled by the father's fine work, industry, devotion, self-sacrifice and great capacities. I can state this with all the more certainty because I very well remember asking him in the first days of our acquaintance whether he were connected with the Barons of Truro, who have the same family name as his. His answer was : "No, I don't think so. I have never heard it. If there is any connection it is so remote as to be negligible." If the word "snob" may be defined as a man who adulates those of superior rank and wealth, and boasts about any *attaches* he may have or pretend to have with such persons, then I may say that, throughout a long and extensive experience of the world, I have never met a man to whom that definition could with less justice be applied than Oscar Wilde. I have heard him boasting of his friendship with great writers, I have heard him speak with pride of notice taken of him and his works by men or women whom he considered great artists, but never once during all the years I knew him did I hear him endeavour to borrow social lustre by boasting of acquaintanceship with noblemen or millionaires.

"They are little better than farmers *en gros*,"

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was a comment he once made when I had made some remark about our great landowning nobility. On several occasions I have been in his company with noblemen of at least equal distinction and pedigrees as the descendants of the dhu glas, or dark grey warrior, and noted with great pride—for I was immensely proud of my friend—that the deference and adulation came from them to him. It was he who was courted, who was listened to, whose words had authority. I remember being with Oscar Wilde at a supper given at the Garrick Club by Beerbohm Tree. The occasion was the election of Lord Edward Cecil to the membership of the club. There was a duke there, and one or two other noblemen, several actors and a few *hommes de lettres*, including the elderly editor of a most important literary weekly. Wilde's *Woman of No Importance* was playing at the Haymarket at the time, and Wilde was certainly the hero of the night and morning. His conversation scintillated. His play being assailed by a Lord Somebody, he made a brilliant defence of his way of looking at things. It is a pity no record of that conversation exists. All I can remember is that the Lord Something Somebody kept repeating: "You see, my dear fellow, if I seduce a woman, she becomes an outcast, while I remain

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Lord Something Somebody of — Hall.” There was a vague *relent* of snobbishness in the air, but it seemed to me to emanate rather from the noblemen themselves. It was most interesting to me to watch the scene, for while the elderly editor and one or two other vague literary men who were present did certainly manifest their delight at being in company so “classy,” the actors very rightly demeaned themselves as though to sup with earls and dukes was an everyday occurrence, of no especial interest. Your actor has no conception of social differences. He has many characteristic faults, no doubt, but snobbishness is not one of them. The man who may be Julius Cæsar to-night, just as yesterday he was Mark Antony, and to-morrow will be Louis XIV., is not going to feel or to show any sense of inferiority to a mere nobleman. I was sitting next to Corney Grain, whose main topic of conversation was gastronomical, and who told me to be cheerful because there was no room for pessimism in a world which produced such delicious things as plovers’ eggs (of which at that supper he consumed at least a dozen). If the actors appeared indifferent to their surroundings, I noticed with some shame that the century-old servility of the literary tribe to the possible patron was still manifesting itself. The elderly

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editor, whose name was known all over Europe, simply writhed with pleasurable emotion every time that the duke or the earl addressed him. At one moment I heard him say to the Lord Something Somebody: "I don't remember whether I ever had the pleasure of meeting your dear father, the late Marquess"—which struck me as somewhat of a *gaucherie*. I was much interested in my observations of the actors on the one hand, busy with dainties and jeroboams, the literary folk on the other, snapping eagerly at crumbs of patronage, and of my friend, who seemed the incarnation of a fusion of all three classes represented there, high up above us all, as Petronius Arbiter may have been at any Roman banquet. However, I was not allowed long to enjoy the spectacle and the piquantly cynical thoughts which it aroused, for I was beckoned to come out of the room by Algernon Borthwick (afterwards Lord Glenesk). "Come along," he said; "I can't possibly stand it any longer. It makes one ashamed to be an editor to listen to old ——. He'll be going on his knees next and licking the duke's boots. There's to be a reception at —— House and I suppose he's angling for a card. But this toadying sickens me. Come upstairs and I'll show you our pictures. We have a *Peg Woffington* which

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is worth looking at." As we were going home with the milk I said to Oscar: "I wonder if —— will get his invitation to —— House." He said: "He has as much chance of getting there as to the moon. When the duke gives a party, he takes the Red Book and draws a line across the table of precedence, and nobody under that line can have any hope of getting a card."

CHAPTER II

Oscar Wilde and Lord Drumlanrig—Oscar Wilde's Friendship with Lord Lytton—At the Embassy Deathbed—Oscar Wilde and Outcasts—His Interest in Bibi-la-Purée—A Student of Thirty Years' Standing—De Montesquiou-Fezensac and Paul Verlaine—Petit Louis—A Brand from the Burning—The Bo'sun's Gratitude—Some of Wilde's Peculiarities—The Scarlet Shame of Red Shades.

LORD ALFRED DOUGLAS says that Wilde was fond of boasting of his acquaintanceship with Douglas's late brother, Lord Drumlanrig (Lord Kelhead), who at one time was one of the Queen's Lords-in-Waiting. I never heard him mention his name until years after I first met him, and some time after Lord Drumlanrig's unfortunate and lamentable death. It was in Paris, after Wilde's release from prison, and he said to me: "I don't think that Bosie [Alfred Douglas] ever wrote anything better or more beautiful than his sonnet to Drumlanrig, his dead brother. It is tender, it is exquisite, it is a pure work of art." I had not read the sonnet at the time, and so Wilde repeated it to me, nor did the beautiful lines lose anything by his manner of saying them.

Douglas also quotes Oscar Wilde's dedication of one of his works "to the dear memory of

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Robert, Earl of Lytton " as a proof of his snobishness, and states that he has it on the authority of one of Lord Lytton's sons (who was a small boy at the time of his death) that his late father had but the slightest acquaintance with him. Now I was in Paris during Lord Lytton's last illness, and Wilde was in Paris also, and I know that he was a frequent visitor to the Embassy during that period and that he was one of the very few friends of the Ambassador who were admitted to his bed-chamber. "*Il est chez son Excellence, et il est impossible de les déranger,*" was the answer given me on one occasion by the Embassy concierge when I had called there, by appointment, to meet Wilde, with whom I was to go to dinner. I can also remember the day on which Lytton died. The news was given me by Oscar Wilde himself, and his distress was certainly genuine, for, for what earthly reason should he have feigned it to me? He told me that he had been with "Owen Meredith" very shortly before he died, and that he had sat by his bedside holding his hand. Indeed I am not certain that he did not say that Lytton had died holding his hand. I know further from English friends of mine who were residents in Paris and on the Embassy list, that Lord Lytton had a liking as well as a great admiration for Oscar Wilde,

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and frequently spoke of the cleverness and charm of his conversation. Lady Dorothy Neville's Memoirs may also be consulted on this.

In 1887 Lord Lytton presents Oscar Wilde with a copy of his book, *After Paradise*, cordially inscribed.

Oscar Wilde had a detestation for anything like self-aggrandisement, and, never practising it himself, I have heard him rebuke people who in his presence said anything which seemed to have been mentioned for this purpose.

I believe, indeed I know, that he was perfectly sincere in the statements he made in Court, during the three trials which he underwent, as to his disregard of social distinctions. He told Mr Carson, who had asked him if he had been aware of the social standing of two guests whom he had entertained to dinner, that he had not known it, and added: "If I had known it I should not have cared. I didn't care twopence what they were. I liked them. I have a passion to civilise the community!"

And again when Mr Carson asked him if any young boy he might pick up in the street would be a pleasing companion he answered: "I would talk to a street arab, with pleasure."

"You would talk to a street arab?" cried Mr Carson, with simulated horror.

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“ If he would talk to me,” answered Wilde, smiling. “ Yes, with pleasure.”

It was noticed in Paris that Oscar Wilde did not at all mind being seen speaking to social outcasts. I have frequently watched him in amused conversation with that immortal amongst Parisian thieves and beggars, André Salis, commonly known as Bibi-la-Purée, a weird, mysterious survival of the Cour des Miracles, a beggar-student of thirty years' standing, a stealer of clocks and umbrellas, partly a poet, partly a police spy, a noctambulous product of Montmartre and of the Latin Quarter, who was kind to the great poet Verlaine and stole for him when “ poor Lelian ” lay dying in want, Bibi-la-Purée, about whose death at the Hôtel Dieu hospital I wrote at the time :

“ He died, as Gervaise died, of exposure and want and privation. Tuberculosis was the direct cause, and his last days in the Hôtel-Dieu hospital were easy. He remained a buffoon to the last, and the very evening of the night on which he died he was masquerading up and down the ward, bringing smiles to lips as blanched as his own. Dying, he, the beggar, enacted for these beggars on their death-beds the many trickeries which had been their trade in life. In the

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penumbra of the long room he mimicked for men who had reached their last infirmity the mock infirmities by which they had wrung compassion and largesse from the world which they were leaving. He turned back his eyelids and parodied the blind. He doubled back his hand and showed a polished stump. He feigned the man who is palsy-stricken and amidst the coughing cachinnations of his audience of experts he played the canting beggar who dupes the pious at the doors of churches. He went out of a world which had not been kind to him triumphant and mocking to his last breath. He died with the *Vos Plaudite* of the Roman clown expressed in the grin of his lantern jaws. The papers recorded his death as a matter of public interest, told the story of his life and spoke gently of his foibles."

The Parisian boulevardier seeing the elegant Oscar Wilde engaged at some boulevard café in an animated conversation with Bibi-la-Purée would have no surprise nor harbour any evil suspicions. In the same way Bibi-la-Purée's friend, the poet Verlaine, might often have been seen in the company of that most distinguished of French noblemen and dilettanti, Count Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac. Count Robert was

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kind for years to the outcast Verlaine, whose reputation in the matter of morality was appalling, who had been in prison in Belgium, who used to boast of having beaten his mother and who was rarely otherwise than what the French call *entre deux vins*, or rather, in his case, *entre deux absinthes*.

In this connection I remember also how one night, at Bullier, Oscar Wilde fell into conversation with a young Latin Quarter *souteneur* who was known as "*Le Petit Louis*," and who had attracted our attention by the grace and vigour with which he had danced the *can-can*, having as *vis-à-vis* a young woman, queen of the high kick and empress of the *grand écart* (or great divide), who years later developed into a ballerina of European, nay, of cosmopolitan, celebrity—no less a person indeed than the famous *Grilled'Egout*. I had offered Petit Louis, who was exhausted after his quadrille performance, a *bock* of the nasty Bal Bullier beer and Oscar Wilde began to talk to him. He learned from Petit Louis that he was heartily sick of the shameful life he was leading in Paris and wanted to get back to Brittany, there to enlist in the navy. But he had no money for the journey, and it was impossible for him to go to the recruiting office *de la Marine* in the clothes—

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the only suit he possessed—which he was wearing, clothes which at a glance betrayed his method of living. Oscar Wilde listened to his story with deep interest and then asked him several questions. In the end he said: “Come to the Hôtel Voltaire, Quai Voltaire, to-morrow at half-past twelve and I will see if I can do anything for you. And you, Robert, come too.”

As we were driving back I said: “Don’t you remember, Oscar, that you have Maurice Rollinat, the poet, coming to lunch at one o’clock to-morrow at your rooms in the Hôtel Voltaire? What will he think if he finds a Latin Quarter *souteneur* there talking to you?”

“I don’t care what he thinks,” said Oscar Wilde. “Petit Louis is for me a human document, and a very interesting one at that. I’ll say more: I intend to ask him to join us at lunch. Yes, I shall have a fourth *couvert* laid. I shall introduce my two guests to each other, as Maurice Rollinat, poet, Petit Louis——”

“No,” I cried. “You had better not do that. He would never forgive you.”

And though he did not carry out his proposal and ask the lad to lunch, he sent him out to buy a decent suit at *La Belle Jardinière* over the bridge, and when the transformed Petit Louis returned he gave him sufficient money and

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above to take him to Brest and to keep him until he had been taken into the navy. And there in the sitting-room of Wilde's suite in the Hôtel Voltaire, for the joy of his emancipation from the horrors of his life in the depths of Parisian vice, did *Le Petit Louis*, former *souteneur* and *marsouin* (marine) to be, execute in the fulness of his heart, and for the delectation of Oscar Wilde and Maurice Rollinat, poets, and of myself, a *pas seul*, or *pas de cavalier* of amazing grace and agility. It was I who brought it to an abrupt close by suggesting that a ready-made suit from *La Belle Jardinière*, a *complet* at forty-nine francs ninety-five cents, could hardly be expected to stand such usage. Petit Louis shortly afterwards departed, and left for Brittany the same afternoon. I heard some weeks later in the Latin Quarter that he had duly enlisted into the navy. I heard and saw nothing more of him until twelve years later, when a fine, sturdy bronzed and bearded boatswain of the French navy called to see me at my apartment on the Boulevard Magenta. I could not "place" him at all.

"I see your embarrassment, monsieur; you don't know me as Louis Caradec. You would remember me by a name which I am ashamed to repeat, as it reminds me of horrors of long

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ago which seem to be a dreadful nightmare. But if I mention the Bal Bullier, the Hôtel Voltaire and 'a noble stranger' you may——"

"Oh, Petit Louis?" I cried.

"Yes. I am ashamed to say that I was he. But, God be praised, all that is dead and buried, dead and buried long ago, dead and buried like Malbrouck. And now as to the 'noble stranger,' my benefactor, the man who saved me. I want to see him to give him my thanks, to show him what I have become. Where is he? Is he well? And oh! tell me his name. Just think how thankless of me: I have forgotten his very name. You see I hardly heard it more than once. What is his name and where can I find him?"

"Do you know, Monsieur Louis Caradec," I said, "I am very sorry I am just like you: I too have forgotten his name."

That was in June 1895, just a few days after Oscar Wilde had been sent to prison for two years with hard labour, and I saw no reason for making Petit Louis privy to his downfall. But I could not help thinking after M. Louis Caradec and I had drunk together the *absinthe de l'amitié* and the bo'sun had taken his departure, what a good witness he might have made for my poor friend's defence. Here was a youth, an

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outcast, with whom Wilde had been seen in company at Bal Bullier, whom he had invited to his hotel, whom he had proposed to invite to lunch with him and two other individuals, for whom he had bought a suit of clothes and to whom he had given a handsome present of money. Why, as bad a case as that of the boy Alphonse Conway of Worthing, to whom he gave a serge suit and a straw hat, because the boy was shabby and because he took an interest in him. Sir Edward Clarke could have rebutted with Louis Caradec quite a number of the witnesses for the Crown, and indeed I had had his story in my mind, as illustrating the innocence of Wilde's eccentric, even quixotic, benevolence, when I tendered myself to Sir Edward Clarke to give evidence on my friend's behalf. I was indeed sorry that the defence found no use for such evidence, because I could have enlightened the jury on other habits of his, in which the prosecution found, or pretended to find, grave reasons for suspicion. And be it noted *en passant* how even the most innocent practices of his were made weapons against him. For instance the burning of perfumes in his rooms and those of his friends : of this much was made. It was a habit he had no doubt contracted at Oxford. I remember very well that when I was



HOUSE IN MERRION SQUARE, DUBLIN, WHERE OSCAR WILDE LIVED AS A BOY.



MERRION SQUARE, DUBLIN, WHERE OSCAR WILDE'S YOUTH WAS SPENT.

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at the University a number of undergraduates used to burn that scented ribbon which one pulls out of a little round, red, cardboard box, which is made I fancy by the House of Rimmel and which is supposed to counteract the unpleasant odour of stale tobacco smoke. His insidious practice of allowing red shades to remain on the candles with which the tables at different London restaurants at which he dined his friends needs neither explanation nor palliation. Yet the jury were asked to see in these red shades the dye of blood-red turpitude. Sir Frank Lockwood, and Mr C. Gill before him, with all the broadmindedness of men of the world and men about town, could not and would not pass over in silence the flagrant immorality of letting a restaurant *maître d'hôtel* put red shades on the candles on one's dinner-tables. I could not have excused this either, but amongst other things which I wanted to tell the jury was that as long ago as twelve years previously Oscar Wilde had been in the habit of writing extravagant letters, which those who received them took for exactly what they were, effusions partly humorous, partly pathetic, but obviously insincere and written as literary essays in epistolary style. Of those first letters which he wrote me, only one escaped the

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mouchard, the second-hand bookseller and the Baronne. It certainly is not the sort of letter that one man writes to another after an acquaintanceship of only a few weeks, but when I received it I was aware that my correspondent was not an ordinary man, and I conceived that his object in writing to me in that way was to impress me with that fact, besides showing me what agreeable things he could say to a friend in the most agreeable prose possible.

With reference to his habit of calling even his most recent friends by their Christian names and of insisting on being addressed by them in a similar fashion—of which habit also a great use was made against him by the prosecution—I had intended to tell the jury that just three days after I had first met him—at a dinner-party at the house of a Greek lady artist—he said to me—and these are his *ipsissima verba*: “I don’t want you to call me Wilde, and I certainly don’t intend to call you Sherard. We are going to be friends: I think we are friends already. Now if we are friends we ought to call each other by our Christian names. If we are not, then I am Mr Wilde and you are Mr Sherard.”

Now though I have lived most of my life abroad and have found foreigners, even the most casual strangers, inclined to address me by my

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Christian name, as Don Roberto, or Monsieur Robert, or in Slavonic countries as Robert, *tout court*, I confess I did not readily fall in with his suggestion, which, I admit, went contrary to my British instincts, and it was only after some time, and even then with a recurrent effort, that I was able to accede to it. But I certainly saw nothing in the suggestion to arouse suspicion. At the worst it was silly—*bêta*, the French would say.

And with regard to his un-English habit of embracing his friends, of which I heard but never witnessed, the jury were perhaps unaware that it is—especially amongst the Latin races—a custom all over the Continent. I remember my indignation when calling at Naples, on a former Dresden school-mate of mine—who had since those early days blossomed into a portly and prosperous hotel-keeper—my friend, *coram populo* on the landing-stage at Sorrento, threw his arms round my neck and embraced me on either cheek. It was un-English and repellent to me, but no harm whatever was meant. And I don't believe that Oscar Wilde meant any harm either, when he followed this effusive Continental method of salutation. That it was unusual and un-English was perhaps what chiefly induced him to adopt it.

CHAPTER III

Posing as Extraordinary—Baudelaire and the Prefect of Police—Oscar Wilde on his Parents—The Veiled Woman—Oscar Wilde's Grandfather and Lineage—"The Small Chemist's Shop"—Oscar Wilde's Republicanism—A Call on Victor Hugo—The Princess and the Editor—Oscar Wilde's Defence of Swinburne—Swinburne's Attitude towards Wilde—Oscar Wilde and the Blackmailers—His Quarrel with Pierre Louÿs.

"EVERYTHING I write is extraordinary," cried Oscar Wilde, in answer to the question—put by Mr Carson—whether he considered one of his letters to Lord Alfred Douglas—which had just been read out—an ordinary letter. "I do not pose as being ordinary, great heavens!" I think that reply gives an explanation—and the true one—not only of his epistolary style, but of his general conduct. What his friends set down to eccentricity, and his enemies attributed to the promptings of a mind diseased and unclean, was in truth merely a well-calculated pose. "Why do you act like that?" asked a Prefect of Police in Paris of the poet Baudelaire, author of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and the translator into French of Poe's Tales. "*Pour épater les bourgeois*" (To astound the public), answered the poet. Most literary men pose as extra-

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ordinary, at least until their success, social and financial, is assured. As a young man Lord Beaconsfield had an eccentric coiffure, and wore extravagant waistcoats and jewellery. Barbey d'Aurevilly used to walk about Montmartre in a cloak of red velvet. Catulle Mendés was to be seen every afternoon sitting on the *terrasse* of the Café Tortoni in Paris with his blonde hair falling down in ringlets over his shoulders. Balzac had a monkish cowl and turned night into day. Victor Hugo dressed as a bluff sea-captain, and tried to look the part. In England to-day in the twentieth century we have men-of-letters of universal fame, who in dress and demeanour are most obviously seeking—*à la* Baudelaire—to astound the public.

I supposed that it was in pursuance of this scheme of his to pose as extraordinary that Oscar Wilde used to talk in the very freest fashion about his father and mother. I remember that it struck me as peculiar that, only a few days after I had made his acquaintance, he should relate to me the gallantries of his late father—Sir William Wilde. It is true that the subject was broached as an illustration of the broad-mindedness of Speranza (Lady Wilde), the mother whom he worshipped. ‘She was a wonderful woman,’ he said, “and such a feeling as vulgar

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jealousy could take no hold on her. She was well aware of my father's constant infidelities, but simply ignored them. Before my father died, in 1876, he lay ill in bed for many days. And every morning a woman dressed in black and closely veiled used to come to our house in Merrion Square, and unhindered either by my mother, or anyone else, used to walk straight upstairs to Sir William's bedroom and sit down at the head of his bed and so sit there all day, without ever speaking a word or once raising her veil. She took no notice of anybody in the room, and nobody paid any attention to her. Not one woman in a thousand would have tolerated her presence, but my mother allowed it, because she knew that my father loved this woman and felt that it must be a joy and a comfort to have her there by his dying bed. And I am sure that she did right not to grudge that last happiness to the man who was about to die, and I am sure that my father understood her apparent indifference, understood that it was not because she did not love him that she permitted her rival's presence, but because she loved him very much, and died with his heart full of gratitude and affection for her." ¹

¹ "No one knew how deeply I loved and honoured her. Her death was terrible to me ; but I, once a lord of language, have



"SPERANZA," LADY WILDE, OSCAR WILDE'S MOTHER.

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In a recent book about Wilde, it is remarked by the author, who was formerly one of his intimate friends, that while everybody knew who his father was, God alone could say who was his grandfather. Now this is as inaccurate as it is unkind. In writing my *Life of Oscar Wilde* I was at particular pains to trace the lineage of my subject both on his father's and on his mother's side. William Wills Wilde (afterwards Sir William Wilde) was the son of Doctor Thomas Wilde, a surgeon in Dublin, by his marriage with Miss Fynn, a woman of very distinguished connections, including the families of Surrige and Ouseley of Dunmore. Thomas Wilde was one of the sons of Ralph Wilde, who came over from Durham in the middle of the eighteenth century, established himself in Roscommon as land agent to the Sandford family and married a Miss O'Flynn, "the daughter of a very ancient Irish family." Ralph Wilde was

no words in which to express my anguish and my shame: She and my father had bequeathed me a name they had made noble and honoured, not merely in literature, art, archæology and science, but in the public history of my own country, in its evolution as a nation. I have disgraced that name eternally. I have made it a low byword among low people. . . What I suffered then, and still suffer, is not for pen to write, or paper to record. My wife, always kind and gentle to me . . . travelled, ill as she was, all the way from Genoa to England to break to me herself the tidings of so irreparable, so irremediable a loss."—OSCAR WILDE in *De Profundis*.

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the son of a Durham business man, whose humble pedigree could be carried back many generations.

It is equally inaccurate and unkind of the writer referred to, to allege that at one time in his career Sir William Wilde "kept a small chemist's shop in Dublin"—a clumsy invention in the career of a man about whose life—owing to the distinction he acquired—the fullest records exist. The foundation of this story may be the fact that Doctor Thomas Wilde, William Wilde's father, had a dispensary connected with his surgery, exactly as most country doctors have to-day.

William Wilde was born at Castlerea, in 1815, and was educated at the Royal School, Banagher. Already in his youth his taste for antiquarian research was exhibited. He commenced his professional studies in 1832 in Dublin, and at an early age distinguished himself not only by medical science, but by initiative and resourcefulness. While still a medical student he wrote a very successful book describing a cruise in the Mediterranean and the East on board the yacht *Crusader*. He continued his studies in London, Berlin and Vienna and started in medical practice in 1841, specialising as an eye and ear doctor. He earned four hundred pounds in his first year, and gave the whole sum towards founding the

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institution originally known as St Mark's Ophthalmic Hospital. This hospital, which was started in a disused stable in Frederick Lane, developed in course of time into that fine institution, The Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital. In 1848 he published his book *The Closing Years of Dean Swift's Life*. In 1851 he married Miss Jane Francesca Elgee ("Speranza"), and in 1853 he was appointed Surgeon-Oculist-in-Ordinary. In 1857 he was created Chevalier of the Kingdom of Sweden and in 1864 he was knighted by Lord Carlisle.

It is certainly untrue to say that either his widow or his sons attached any social importance to this distinction, such as it is, and particularly with regard to Oscar Wilde is the charge of snobbishness and tuft-hunting a false one. He nowhere in *De Profundis* declares that he had inherited "a noble name," in the sense of aristocratic descent. What he does say is that his mother and his father had bequeathed him a name which they had made noble and honoured by their labours and achievements—which is quite a different thing. I knew Oscar Wilde very well for a great number of years and I never heard him once boasting of his aristocratic acquaintances. As a matter of fact he was somewhat inclined to socialism. One remembers

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his lines saying how in some things he is with those who die upon the barricades. When I first met him in Paris he did actually profess "an elegant Republicanism." We were both at that time somewhat under the influence of Victor Hugo and *Les Misérables*. I took him to one of Hugo's receptions, and as we walked home he repeated some of the passages from the descriptions in *Les Misérables* of the fighting in the streets of Paris. "'Citoyen,' lui disait Enjolras, 'ma mère, c'est la République,'" was a line he repeated more than once. On our way to the Quai Voltaire we passed in front of the Tuileries, the blackened ruins of which were still standing in 1883, and pointing to them he said: "There is not there one little blackened stone which is not to me a chapter in the Bible of Democracy." At Victor Hugo's that night there was present a Polish princess of Royal affinities who made a dead set upon the young Irish poet, but who, as I noticed, made little headway with him. She was one of the most distinguished women in the smart set of the day in Paris, and when I afterwards mentioned this to him, he replied that that might be so, but that she struck him as being particularly tedious. He seemed vastly to prefer speaking with Auguste Vacquerie, the Radical editor of *Le Rappel*; to whom perhaps that

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description might with greater justice have been applied. It is true that Wilde and Vacquerie had a topic in which both were specially interested—namely, the character and literary standing of the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. Swinburne had been staying in Paris on a visit to Victor Hugo some short time previously and Vacquerie, who had been very frequently in his company, was full of questions about him. He did not seem quite to understand the English poet, or to be able to “place” him, and he listened with great interest to the anecdotes which Wilde had to tell about him. He wanted Victor Hugo to listen too, but the master—as usual after dinner—had fallen asleep. Oscar Wilde’s remarks on Swinburne were a tribute to the poet, and in view of a decided *souffçon* of hostility amongst his listeners to some extent a defence also. I remember his emphatic repudiation of the suggestion that he was in the habit of taking too much to drink. “We all thought,” said Vacquerie, “that that must be the explanation of his extraordinary excitability while he was here. His language was torrential. He jumped about *comme une carpe*. There was no holding him. He made ‘the master’ feel quite nervous, and I don’t think any of us were very sorry when he left.” Wilde said of him that he

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was of so excitable a temperament that the mere contemplation of a glass of wine was sufficient to throw him into a Bacchanalian frenzy, and he implied that any derogation of him would be keenly resented by any lover of English literature.

I remembered Wilde's defence of Swinburne when, several years later, I had reason to understand—from a personal experience—with what horror Swinburne regarded him after his disgrace and downfall. Yet in his youth Swinburne himself had been stigmatised as a corrupter of morals, a stigma from which he never lived to clear himself. It was on account of this old prejudice against him that the Nobel Prize for Literature was never awarded to him. In France this omission, by the way, was considered so gross an injustice that a number of French poets, headed by Pierre Louÿs, the author of *Aphrodite*, had decided, by way of protest, to publish a volume of poems to be entitled, *Vers offerts à Monsieur Swinburne*. "And," so wrote Pierre Louÿs to me, "just as the first contributions were coming in, Swinburne died." There was another passage in this letter which, contrasting as it does with the remarks I heard that evening at Victor Hugo's house, I want to quote :

"You have had an immense loss in England this year—Swinburne," wrote Louÿs. "He was

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the greatest living poet. When I think that he used to write to me when I was nineteen years old, that he contributed to my first review, and that during twenty years I have been allowing him to die without going to see him I cannot console myself."

This Pierre Louÿs is the gentleman whose name came up at the Old Bailey during the Queensberry trial with reference to his translation into French verse of a letter from Oscar Wilde to one of his friends, a letter, by the way, produced by Wilde himself. This letter had come, with others, into the hands of a gang of London blackmailers, who had attempted to extort a large sum of money in exchange for it from its author. Oscar Wilde used to relate with great gusto how he faced them, defeated their object and recovered the document with little or no expense. I heard him telling this story several times before the matter came into Court, and it certainly did not appear that he was in any way ashamed of this letter, or had had any suspicion that it might be used against him as a presumption of culpability. His version of its recovery was given in Court as follows.

Asked by Sir Edward Clarke to relate what happened, he said that a man called at his house

in Tite Street to inform him that this letter, a copy of which had been sent to Mr Beerbohm Tree, was not in his possession. "His name was Allen," continued the prosecutor. "I felt that this was the man who wanted money from me. I said: 'I suppose you have come about my beautiful letter? If you had not been so foolish as to send a copy of it to Mr Beerbohm Tree, I would gladly have paid you a very large sum of money for the letter, as I consider it to be a work of art.' He said: 'A very curious construction can be put on that letter.' I said in reply: 'Art is rarely intelligible to the criminal classes.' He said: 'A man has offered me £60 for it.' I said to him: 'If you take my advice you will go to that man and sell my letter to him for £60. I myself have never received so large a sum for any prose work of that length; but I am glad to find that there is someone in England who considers a letter of mine worth £60.' He was somewhat taken aback, by my manner perhaps, and said: 'The man is out of town.' I replied: 'He is sure to come back,' and I advised him to get the £60. He then changed his manner a little, saying that he had not a single penny, and that he had been on many occasions trying to find me. I said that I could not guarantee his cab expenses, but

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that I would gladly give him half-a-sovereign. He took the money and went away."

"Was anything said about a sonnet?" asked Sir Edward.

"Yes," replied Oscar Wilde. "I said: 'The letter, which is a prose poem, will shortly be published in sonnet form in a delightful magazine and I will send you a copy of it.'"

"As a matter of fact, the letter was the basis of a French poem that was published in *The Spirit Lamp*?"

"Yes."

"It is signed 'Pierre Louÿs.' Is that the *nom de plume* of a friend of yours?"

"Yes, a young French poet of great distinction, a friend of mine, who has lived in England."

At that time, Oscar Wilde could no longer call Pierre Louÿs a friend of his, because at least a year previously the two had quarrelled and had agreed not to know each other any more. I am not sure what the quarrel was about, but at that time Wilde had a good many enemies in Paris, his eccentricities were being malevolently commented upon, and I fancy that Pierre Louÿs, whose brother occupied a very high post in the diplomatic service, was recommended by him to cease an acquaintance which

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might injure his social prospects. Poor Wilde had for years seen himself abandoned by his friends, and I remember that just before I first met him a very old Oxford friend of his—who has come to great public honours since—had



Femmes en la nuit

*

à M^r Oscar Wilde

I

Elle siège, croisant par une faible éteinte
Un bras peu sur les seins vers spirales d'orfin,
Et cambre au bord du trône où lève le dauphin
Sa peau de lune froide et d'air nocturne pointe.

D'un long ruban d'iris sa chevelure est ceinte
Elle siège immobile en son être divin;
Ses deux yeux abaissés réverbèrent sans fin
L'incolore nœubil comme une étoile éteinte.

Elle tient dans ses doigts symboliques et bleus
Au plivierge du sexe un lotus fabuleux;
Et deux tiges de lys qui sortent des aisselles

Glissent le long du corps sous un geste indulgent
Toucher des lèvres de leurs bouches immortelles
Et marbre où sont fléchis ses pieds ornés d'argent.

Facsimile of a remarkable French poem dedicated to Oscar Wilde by the French poet, Pierre Louÿs, who also translated into a French sonnet the letter addressed by Oscar Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas, the letter on which Mr Wilde was blackmailed, and which had so much to do with his conviction.

Elle danse, elle est nue, elle est grave. Ses flancs
Ondulent d'ombre bleue et de sueur farouchie.
Dans les cheveux mêlés s'ouvre rouge la bouche
Et le regard s'éteint au fond des cils tremblants

Ses doigts caressent vers des lèvres ignorées
La peau douce, la chaleur molle de ses seins.
Ses coudes étendus éveillent au essaim
Des baisers, l'abri creux des épaules dorées.

Fuis la taille ployée à la renverse, tend
Le pur ventre, gonfle d'un souffle intermittent,
— Et sous l'arachnéen fourreau noir de sa robe

Ses bras tendres avec des gestes délicats
Ses pieds blancs sur la poudre d'or et les micas
Cherchent l'imaginaire amant qui se dérobe...

III

Elles avaient piqué des roses dans leurs boucles
Et mouillé leurs cheveux avec des parfums lourds
Leurs souples flancs roulaient des houle de velours
Leurs longs yeux palpitaient comme des escarboucles

Des coloubettes d'argent tournaient sur leurs bras nus
Des colliers descendaient sur leurs mamelles grises
Leurs souffles si légers erraient comme des brises
Dans leurs voix tristes et leurs liras ingénus

Et les rougeurs des fleurs sur leurs bouches nocturnes
Tremblaient avec des nonchalancesses taciturnes
Au bout de leurs doigts blancs onglés de carmin

Et les sourds tapis bleus déroulaient le chemin
Où les filles du dieu sur des fleurs de verveines
Se charmaient l'une l'autre au fil des heures vaines.

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written to him to say he wished to have no more to do with him. Referring to this *lâchage*, he said to me apropos of the letter in which his whilom friend closed their relationship : “ What he says is like a poor little linnet’s cry by the roadside along which my measureless ambition is sweeping forward.” He took Pierre Louÿs’ *cong e* in a much less philosophical spirit, and indeed was very angry about it. I remember his telling another friend and myself what had happened and saying : “ I really regret now that I never learned the use of arms, so that I could call people out who write me letters like that to sting me, and punish them for their temerity.”

CHAPTER IV

A Reason for Parisian Hostility—Wilde's "Neronian Coiffure"²²
—The Comments of *Punch*—Pierre Louÿs' Sonnet—The
"Unrentable"¹¹ Wilde—Lady Wilde at Home—As I saw
Her—As Madame de Brémont saw Her—"Flowers for the
Poet"²²—The Survival of a Worthless Book—Oscar Wilde
as Critic—Madame de Brémont's Book—Oscar Wilde
and his Wardrobe—His "Business Suits."²²

OSCAR WILDE incited people in Paris to talk about him unfavourably by certain mannerisms and eccentricities of dress which irritated the literary men. For instance, he used to wear gorgeous fur-lined overcoats, which gentlemen do not wear in Paris. And then there was that custom of his of having his hair curled. This is common enough amongst the French proletariat, indeed no French workman would think of going to his wedding without first paying a visit to a *coiffeur-friseur* (hairdresser), but it is not usual *dans le monde*. He had acquired this custom after his return from America and a visit to the Louvre Museum, where the coiffure of the Emperor Nero, in a bust, had attracted his attention, at a time when, having discarded the long hair of the æsthetic period, he was considering in what style to

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have his really beautiful *chevelure* arranged. He wrote me from London: "Society must be amazed, and my Neronian coiffure has amazed it. Nobody recognises me, and everybody tells me I look young; that is delightful of course."

The papers commented on this change in the æsthete's appearance, and in one of its numbers for 1883 *Punch* had the following paragraphs on the matter.

" A WILDE GUESS

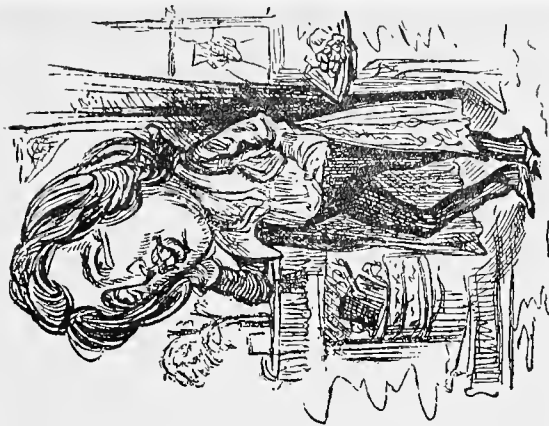
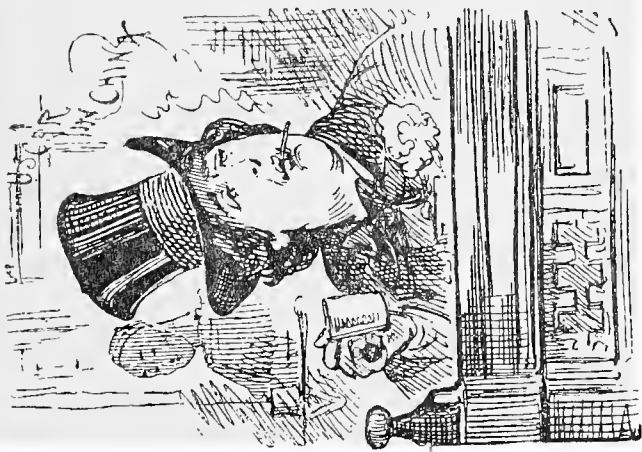
"A 'Society sixpenny' states that it was while Mr Oscar Wilde stood before the bust of Nero in the Louvre that he decided to crisp his flowing locks after the fashion of the Imperial Fiddler. The motive for this particular change is not far to seek, perhaps. Oscar probably found his influence in the boudoirs waning and determined to get himself up *à la* the Roman Emperor in order that he might once again be the centre of a Nero-worshipping circle of damosels."

Another reference is made in *Punch* under the heading:

" WILDE WAGGERY

"Mr Oscar Wilde having come back from

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Oscar Wilde's eccentricities of Dress and Coiffure, in the seventies and eighties, before he met the author and adopted the "Neronian Coiffure" and the Beau Brummel attire

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Paris with a highly-frizzled *chevelure*, the *World* is moved as follows :

“ ‘ Our Oscar is with us again ; but, O,
He is changed who was once so fair !
Has the iron gone into his soul ? O no !
It has only gone over his hair.’ ”

“ A recollection of the influence the eminent æsthete used apparently to exercise over the sayings and the doings of the Kyrle Society emboldens us to humbly cap our contemporary’s epigram to this extent :

“ The ‘ Kyrle ’ was once, as you’re aware,
To Oscar’s tune rejoiced to twirl :
But he who gave the ‘ Kyrle ’ an air
Now gives instead his hair a curl.”

It will be seen from these somewhat laboured pleasantries that poor Wilde’s little freak of fashion evoked in London nothing graver than amusement. Yet ten years later this same fashion of his was to excite such malevolent comment as to induce a sincere friend and admirer of his to refuse him his further acquaintance, and still later, at the time of his trial, to be used against him by the Treasury Counsel as directly suggestive of immoral tendencies.

I do not know if Pierre Louÿs’ translation of the letter—which has since been described

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as an "idiot letter" by the person to whom it was addressed—has been reprinted anywhere, so as a literary curiosity it is appended :

SONNET

A letter written in prose poetry by Mr Oscar Wilde to a friend, and translated into rhymed poetry by a poet of no importance

HYACINTHE ! ô mon cœur ! jeune dieu doux et blond !
Tes yeux sont la lumière de la mer ! ta bouche,
Le sang rouge du soir où mon soleil se couche. . . .
Je t'aime, enfant câlin, cher aux bras d'Apollon.

Tu chantais, et ma lyre est moins douce, le long
Des rameaux suspendus que la brise effarouche,
A frémir, que ta voix à chanter, quand je touche
Tes cheveux couronnés d'acanthé et de houblon.

Mais tu pars ! tu me fuis pour les Portes d'Hercule ;
Va, rafraîchis tes mains dans le clair crépuscule
Des choses où descend l'âme antique. Et reviens,

Hyacinthe adoré : hyacinthe ! hyacinthe !
Car je veux voir toujours dans les bois syriens
Ton beau corps étendu sur la rose et l'absinthe.

Considerable importance was attached by the Prosecution at all the trials to this letter, which Oscar Wilde described as a "beautiful letter," a poem, something like one of Shakespeare's sonnets, and on which the person who received it has recently expressed a very caustic opinion. Mr Justice Wills' view of it, and of other letters

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that were read at the trial, was, he preferred not to express any opinion as to whether the Prosecution was justified in the use it endeavoured to make of them. He added that he himself might be dull, but could not see the extreme beauty of the language.

To return to Wilde's account of how he regained possession of this letter, he related that after the departure of Allen, with his half-sovereign, a man giving the name of Cliburn came to his house. He used dramatically to describe the "panther-like gliding" of the blackmailer's entrance. "I went out to him and said: 'I cannot bother any more about this matter!' He produced the letter out of his pocket saying: 'Allen has asked me to give it back to you!' I did not take it immediately but asked: 'Why does Allen give me back this letter?' He said: 'Well, he says that you were kind to him, and that there is no use in trying to "rent" you [blackmail you] as you only laugh at us!' I took the letter and said: 'I will accept it back, and you can thank Allen from me for all the anxiety he has shown about it!' I looked at the letter and saw that it was extremely soiled. I said to him: 'I think it is quite unpardonable that better care was not taken of this original manuscript of mine!'

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He said he was very sorry, but it had been in so many hands. I gave him half-a-sovereign for his trouble and then said: 'I am afraid you are leading a wonderfully wicked life!' He said: 'There is good and bad in every one of us!' I told him he was a born philosopher, and he then left."

In cross-examination Wilde said that the reason why he gave the blackmailers ten shillings each was to show his contempt for them. It is quite obvious from his conduct throughout with regard to this letter that he considered it an entirely innocent composition.

Sir William Wilde lived long enough to see both his sons, William and Oscar, give promise of brilliant careers. He died on 19th April 1876, universally lamented. His sons had every reason and right to be proud of their father, who indeed did bequeath to them a name made noble.

I can only remember one occasion on which I met Lady Wilde, Oscar's mother, for though she was living at Willie Wilde's house, in Oakley Street, during all those dreadful days in May, 1895, when I was a constant visitor to my friend, who had been released on bail, she was confined to her room, indeed to her bed. I had been introduced to her at her house in Park Street, Grosvenor Square, where she lived with her

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son William, in 1883, and it was Oscar who took me there. I recall with what pride he said to me: "Robert, my mother!" She was unfashionably dressed, in a Mid-Victorian style of costume, made of black silk, and she wore several large pieces of cameo jewellery. Her hair was dark and in ringlets, and her broad face, with its massive features, was illuminated by her magnificent eyes. I forget what she said to me at the moment of my presentation, but some minutes later, as I was standing talking to Doctor Anna Kingsford, I saw her crossing the drawing-room towards me, walking in a stately and Phædra-like fashion. She was holding out a posy of narcissi and kept saying: "Flowers for the poet! Flowers for the poet!" It appears that it was for me that they were intended, Oscar having told her that I was bringing out a volume of verse. The said volume of verse, by the way, was deservedly "slated" by Willie Wilde in *Vanity Fair*. He said, *inter alia*, that I had done right to call it *Whispers*, for that it would make no noise in the world. It has been my unfortunate experience, however, to see such survival in that wretched book as is indicated by its frequent appearance in catalogues of second-hand books, and for no other reason than that it was "affectionately

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and admiringly” dedicated to Oscar Wilde, “poet and friend.” Oscar himself made a little jest of it, in his reviewing days. When noticing a book of mine, in one of his paragraphs in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, he mentioned that the author had “come through ‘early poems,’ a three-volume novel, and other complaints common to his time of life.” Perhaps he thought I deserved a little punishment for associating his name with such very poor verse. I could not however foresee, when I wrote that dedication, that thirty years later, simply on account of it, people would be asking for the book. Oscar Wilde always told me that he disliked reviewing, and especially the work of that nature which he did for *The Lady’s World*. It was most tedious, he said. Nor did he care to condemn.

“I never write reviews now of contemporary literature,” he writes in a letter to a lady who had offered to send him a copy of one of her books, “or indeed reviews of any kind. For a time, reviewing interested me a little, but I tired of it very soon, and I don’t think I shall ever return to it.”

A very interesting book on Oscar Wilde and his mother, by Anna, Countess de Brémont, should be read by everybody who wishes to form

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an opinion on Lady Wilde. Madame de Brémont visited her first at the Park Street house, about three years after my visit there, and great changes must have taken place in the house as well as in its mistress, if one is to judge from the following first impressions which Madame de Brémont recorded: "What matters the old-fashioned purple brocade gown, the towering headdress of velvet, the long gold earrings, or the yellow lace fichu crossed on her breast and fastened with innumerable enormous brooches, the huge bracelets of turquoise and gold, the rings on every finger? Her faded splendour was more striking than the most fashionable attire, for she wore that ancient finery with a grace and dignity that robbed it of its grotesqueness."

I certainly saw nothing grotesque in Lady Wilde's attire. She was not, it is true, fashionably dressed, but she certainly presented no such appearance as described by Madame de Brémont.

Doubtless during the three years between 1883 and 1886 Lady Wilde's eccentricities in the matter of dress had developed, while from Madame de Brémont's description of her home, so different from the impression of comfort and elegance which it produced on me, it would appear that during this period also her financial

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position had grown very much worse. As a matter of fact, those were very bad years for the Wildes.

Oscar, who was now married, had alone an aptness in belles lettres as a bread-winner, Willie had only the precarious resources of the free-lance journalist, while Lady Wilde's income from her estates in Ireland had shared the fate of all incomes derived from such sources at that period of Irish agricultural depression.

Madame de Brémont continues : “ She posed in that dim, dingy room like the *grande dame* that she was by right of intellect—nay genius—and noble Irish blood. . . . She appeared absolutely unconscious of the incongruities around her—the dowdy maid, the poorly furnished room, the badly served tea, the dust and dinginess, the flickering candles, all were evidently matters of small importance in the light of her majestic presence and brilliant conversation. . . . She gave me from the first the impression that it was she who made the room, and not the room that made her, or in other words a *grande dame* is ever a *grande dame* whether she dwells in a palace or a hovel. Not that the old house in Park Street was a hovel by any means. . . .”

At that time Lady Wilde, who could no longer

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afford to live in Mayfair, was moving to the house in Oakley Street, Chelsea, where about ten years later she died, during her son's imprisonment. It was a poor house, of the kind usually let out in furnished apartments, with a basement, an area, a plot of waste at the back, and a front and back room, communicating by means of folding doors on each floor. Here Lady Wilde resumed her receptions "with great *éclat*," says Madame de Brémont, who describes her first visit there with some picturesqueness. "I found myself finally at the door of the reception-room, which seemed to my eyes, filled with the sunlight of the outer air, shrouded in darkness pierced here and there by a dimly gleaming red light. As my eyes gradually became accustomed to the twilight of the rooms before me, I could discern faces that stood out with Rembrandtesque distinctness. It gave me a strange feeling of recovery from an attack of blindness to see those shadowy faces, while the uproar from those voices of the unseen produced on me quite an uncanny sensation. This, with the close atmosphere of the rooms, was making me decidedly nervous, when the sound of Lady Wilde's voice broke the unpleasant spell. . . . In the semi-darkness she loomed up a majestic figure, her head-dress with its long white streamers

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and glittering jewels giving her quite a queenly air.”

Here is a description of Oscar Wilde as he showed himself at one of his mother's Oakley Street receptions: “As he bowed over his mother's hand I noted the up-to-date elegance of his attire—the short crisp locks of hair, with just a suspicion of the old-time wave, brushed back from the high brow, the indefinable air of the dandy that hung around him. He was no longer the æsthetic *poseur*, but a resplendent dandy, from the pale pink carnation in the lapel of his frock-coat to the exquisite tint of the gloves and the cut of the low shoes of the latest mode.”

Oscar Wilde always wore buttonhole flowers. It will be remembered that he introduced from Paris that invention of some decadent horticulturist with a penchant for chemical experiments, the green carnation,¹ which became the vogue amongst the *jeunes* in London, and supplied Mr Robert Hichens with a taking title for the *roman à clef* which made his reputation. In his hey-day of brief financial prosperity Oscar Wilde had a standing arrangement with a florist in the Burlington Arcade to supply him

¹The green carnation was evolved by fumigating a white pink over burning sulphur.

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with two *boutonnieres* daily, one at half-a-guinea for himself and one at half-a-crown for the driver of his hansom-cab for that day.

At his mother's receptions Oscar Wilde "spoke little, but seemed to efface himself that his mother might display her brilliant wit and hold everyone by the charm of her conversation, but his voice in the few words of greeting he exchanged with friends had a triumphant note that was absent when I last heard him speak. His smile was as gracious, but more kindly. The covert sneer in it had vanished." Now I protest I never once in all my life saw anything even vaguely resembling a sneer on my friend's lips. This *en passant*. I do not believe he could have sneered if he had tried ever so hard.

With regard to his dress as described above, it appears that in 1886 he had already begun to abandon all eccentricities of costume and was endeavouring to dress *à la mode*. After his return from America he had given up the "æsthetic" masquerade in which he had first attracted attention to himself. Here is a description of him as he appeared in 1882 in New York in the costume referred to: "His splendid youth and manly bearing lent a certain charm to the strange costume in which he masqueraded. He shone to far greater and better advantage

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amid these surroundings than he did on the lecture platform. There was a dignity and graciousness in his manner that blinded one to his eccentric appearance. The long locks of rich brown hair that waved across his forehead and undulated to his shoulders gave his fine head an almost feminine beauty. It might have been the head of a splendid girl, were it not for the muscular throat, fully displayed by the rolling collar and fantastic green silk necktie, knotted after the fashion of an *étudiant* of the Parisian studios, the broad, somewhat heavy shoulders encased in the well-fitting velvet coat with its broad lapels, the left of which bore the ubiquitous emblem, a huge and magnificent specimen of the sunflower. With the velvet coat he wore knee breeches, black silk hose and buckled shoes."

When I first met him in Paris he was dressing—apart from his use of fur coats and rather showy jewellery—like an ordinary French gentleman, silk hat, redingote and so on. At home, when he was at work, he donned a white woollen dressing-gown, which somewhat resembled a monk's robe, a *costume de travail*, the idea of which he had borrowed from that gigantic worker, Honoré de Balzac the author of the *Comédie Humaine*. Balzac used to ex-

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plain his use of this dress by saying that it suggested to him the seclusion of a monastic cell, where he could fancy himself immured, in the person of some mediæval *frère*, laboriously engaged, year in, year out, the livelong day and most of the night, pen in hand, at work over some gorgeous and illuminated manuscript. And it will be remembered that one of Balzac's tenets was : “ *Le travail constant est la loi de l'art, comme celle de la vie, car l'art c'est la création idéalisée.*” To remind himself further of the giant worker, Balzac, Wilde had had a walking-stick made after the model of one which the French novelist had created and which had been so much talked about in the Paris of his day that Delphine Gay had written a book entitled *Monsieur de Balzac's Walking-Stick*. It was an ivory stick with a blue pommel, turquoises or lapis-lazuli.

He was not, however, long content to remain in the current fashion ; he desired to be distinctive and noticeable ; and during the first weeks of our acquaintance he was debating what style of dress to adopt. He hesitated between the mode of 1848 (Paris) and that made fashionable by Beau Brummel. In the meanwhile he revived the fashion of shirt-cuffs which turned back over the cuffs of the coat, a revival for

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which the laundress of the Hôtel Voltaire was heard to bless him. In the end and on his return to London in 1883—as was duly announced in *The World* by his friend, Edmund Yates—he adopted the costume of Beau Brummel. A contemporary number of *Punch* has an illustrated skit on this departure, as well as an impromptu running :

“ OSCAR’S LATEST FASHION

“ Oscar as Brummel dresses now, to show
His *beau ideal* is a *real* ‘ Beau.’ ”

After he had made his great successes on the stage, and was consequently prosperous, he definitely abandoned all eccentricities of costume. He could now afford a fashionable tailor ; he could now afford to dispense with the publicity of notoriety. Lord Alfred Douglas, who knew him at this period, and elaborately describes his various “ get-ups,” gives us the picture of a modish man-about-town.

A full description of his wardrobe during his lifetime would have to include a hideous costume of brown spangled with a black device, which he had to wear during a period which will be dealt with lower down.

Towards the end of his life he abandoned all foppery and contented himself with the cheap

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clothes of the middle-class tailors. Amongst pathetic documents left behind him, none, I think, was more moving—to one who had watched his career, in which dress had played so great a part—than an unpaid bill from a cheap tailor for *deux complets*, at three pounds each—two business suits—for one whose only business—*hélas !*—was to suffer.

CHAPTER V

Oscar Wilde's Mother—Her Plain-Speaking—"Astonishing the Bourgeois"—Lady Wilde's Bills—The Little Rack in Oakley Street—Oscar Wilde's Generosity—"Friends Always Share"—How he helped me—The Warder's Five-Pound Note—Oscar and Ouida—The Publisher's Fiver—"Manna in the Desert"—Ernest Dowson's Loan—The Villa Guidice—Oscar Wilde and Ernest Dowson.

LADY WILDE seems to have been a woman who spoke out what she thought, without minding what people might think of her views or of her manner of enunciating them. Those who make public opinion—and Speranza was certainly one of these—do not heed it.

"There is no woman living who would not give the lid off the milk-jug to some man, if she came across the right one," was a cynical saying of hers which is still remembered in Dublin. Oscar Wilde, who, though he had the highest respect for his mother, seemed rather proud of her eccentricities of manner, speech and thought, was once heard to invite a fellow-collegian to come home with him to his mother's "where we have founded a Society for the Suppression of Virtue." She told Miss Hamilton how she disliked some forms of journalism. "I

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can't write," she said, "about such things as Mrs Green looked very well in black, and Mrs Black looked very well in green."

The following characteristic anecdote, illustrating her way of talking, is related by a lady:

"When I was at Oakley Street, one day, I asked what time it was, as I wanted to catch a train.

" 'Does anyone here,' asked Lady Wilde, with one of her lofty glances, 'know what time it is? We never know in this house about Time.' "

Arthur Ransome, whose famous book on Oscar Wilde is described, in a quotation from *The Times*, on its cover as "the first book on Wilde with a good excuse for existence" disposes of Speranza in the following lines:—
"His mother, whose maiden name was Elgee, was a clever woman, who, when very young, writing as Speranza in a revolutionary paper, had tried to rouse Irishmen to the storming of Dublin Castle. She read Latin and Greek, but was ready to suffer fools for the sake of social adulation. She was clever enough to enjoy astonishing the *bourgeois*, but her cleverness seldom carried her further. When Wilde was born, she was twenty-eight and her husband thirty-nine. They were people of consideration

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use that word here. It is only tradespeople who are respectable. We are above respectability.'

"I did not argue with my friend, but took her strange lesson on social distinctions in all seriousness, and never attempted to introduce another *respectable* woman at her At Homes. Lady Wilde was no doubt right in her use of the word, but it was just such observations that gained her many enemies in the guise of pretended friends, one or two of whom have most unjustly ridiculed her memory by absurd stories."

One such story was to the effect that she was in the habit of putting on three gowns, one over the other—very possibly for warmth's sake, when the weather was cold and the supply of coal and gas had been cut off in Oakley Street, because there was no money to pay for them and Oscar, the generous, second son, was either away or in similar financial straits. For when Oscar had money his mother was never allowed to want for anything. In the downstairs front room in Oakley Street opposite the door was the fireplace, and above the right-hand corner of the mantelpiece hung a small lacquer rack, in which were stuck the unpaid bills of Lady Wilde's *ménage*. Whenever Oscar called on his mother, before going upstairs to her

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private suite (in her later years she rarely, if ever, came downstairs), he invariably used to enter this front room, cross over rapidly to the fireplace, and examine the unpaid bills. He had sufficient experience of financial emergencies to be able to decide which of Lady Wilde's liabilities it was urgent to discharge, and then and there on the marble mantelpiece the necessary cheque would be written. In money matters, as will hereafterwards be detailed, Oscar Wilde was indeed munificent, and with regard to his own possessions, at least, he had no sense of property whatever. "*La propriété, c'est le vol,*" he would sometimes say, quoting from Proudhon. "Friends always share," was another of his sayings, when forcing a loan or a gift upon some reluctant friend. The first time I heard him say it was just before I left Paris in 1883, when he obliged me to take fifteen pounds from him as a loan, because without it I should have been unable to proceed. I had entered my name as a candidate for an appointment in the East and through some mistake on the part of my bank no funds arrived on the very day on which I had to start, no money for the journey and, what was even more serious, no money with which to pay the fees for the examination. Oscar Wilde had from

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the first dissuaded me from going in for this appointment.

“ You will find it more than tedious,” he said. “ What you have to do is to stay in Paris and write fine things.” But when he heard that I was being prevented from going to London, and entering the examination, because my bank had disappointed me, he insisted on lending me fifteen pounds, so that I was able to get away to London the same night as I had intended to do. “ Friends always share,” he said then. I think that poor Ouida always remembered his kindness to her when she was in great financial straits in London. That was in the days of her temporary eclipse and before *The Massarenes*. She had been much fêted in London, but had been unable to renew her contract with her publishers, her books being then entirely out of vogue. Her funds ran out, and having been forced to leave the Langham Hotel, *faute de paiement*, she was next ejected from her lodgings in Margaret Street. She then remembered the grand folk who had lionised her and applied to them for assistance. “ But,” as Oscar Wilde said to me, “ rich people never lend money,” and things would have gone very hard with Mademoiselle de la Ramée had not Oscar come to the rescue. He furnished her with sufficient

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money to pay the Margaret Street people and rescue her luggage, and then to return to Florence. Of course, he never said a word about it. I find among some papers, by the way, a letter from Ouida to him, which I reproduce. And while ready to help others he did not—until absolute necessity forced him—ever offer his friends the opportunity of sharing with him. Even in his distress in Naples and in Paris after his release from prison, it was to business acquaintances rather than to friends that he addressed himself. During his stress in Naples, I was in London and fairly prosperous and could, and would, have helped him gladly, if I had had any inkling of the real state of his affairs. But he never allowed friends to share with him then—at least, not his oldest friend. I have numerous copies of letters written by Oscar Wilde from the Villa Guidice to the late Leonard Smithers (the publisher), and in order to illustrate the distress at Naples to which I have referred, I will quote here from some of these letters some eloquent passages :

On a certain "Friday" (it would be some time in October 1897) he writes :

"MY DEAR SMITHERS,—The £5, like manna

they sleep.
Free Passes will be
to pass from here
Some weeks since
He is coming
here again on
the 15th.
Theater Building
over 7th Avenue



11 June 1890

Dear Mr. Wilson.

You were asked
the 2 pairs and
a testimonial
to Mrs. Burnett
where will this

lady do, if
suckle adap takes
as the projected
one of the
is possible?
I there no every
stopping the
steals or if

measuring
there is pay for
thee — they steal
Ray, as is
leave them
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Facsimile of a Letter to Oscar Wilde from Ouida. Wilde generously came to the lady novelist's assistance at a time when she was in great straits in London

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from heaven, arrived safe. Many thanks for your endless kindness.”

Apropos of five pounds, only a very few months previously, in fact just before he left Reading Gaol, his financial position was a source of great anxiety to him, and a friend (as a matter of fact, one of the prison warders) to whom he confided his trouble said to him : “ Well, I have got five pounds put by. You can have them when you go out if you will give me an address where to send them to.” Oscar Wilde refused the proffered loan. The man then said : “ You’ll miss my five pounds if you don’t take them, when you wake up one morning and find yourself without a breakfast.” “ I hope that it will never come to that,” said Wilde ; “ but, if it does, I promise to write to you for your five pounds, and I will buy a sandwich with it.” “ And a cigar,” said the man, with a laugh. “ The amount,” said Wilde, “ would scarcely run to that, but should there be anything over, I’ll buy a postage stamp and write an acknowledgment.”

At the time when the five pounds from Smithers came “ like manna,” Ernest Dowson, the poet, was in debt to Oscar Wilde for money which he had advanced him in the spring of that year, shortly after his release from prison and while he

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was living at Berneval. Ernest Dowson was at Arques-la-Bataille on the other side of Dieppe, and, *more Ernesti*, was in difficulties with his landlord. His publisher, Smithers, was unwilling to make any further advances on the hack work to which the poor poet was constrained. It was at a time when he was in great difficulty that Oscar Wilde went over to Arques, paid his bill (or part of it), and invited him to come to Berneval, where he kept him until his affairs improved. It was a kind act, because already at that time Oscar Wilde was in financial straits once more. Of the considerable sum which had been given by a lady to be handed to him on his release only a portion had come into his hands ; his mode of life at Berneval had been large and generous, and at the time of which I am speaking he was so little in a position to entertain friends (still less to finance them) that those who visited him there used to take their meals at their own charges at the neighbouring hotel.

No doubt, Ernest Dowson, who was an honourable man, hearing—not from Oscar Wilde himself but from their mutual friend Smithers—of the former's embarrassments, and mortally anxious to repay what had been lent him at Arques, wrote some letters to Oscar Wilde, full

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of self-reproach on the subject, for in a postscript to a letter to Smithers, dated 8th October, Wilde writes: "Ernest Dowson is really too tedious over his debt to me. It is a very small thing, but necessary for me."

On 22nd October Wilde writes to Smithers: "In the desert of my life you raised up the lovely mirage of the great sum of £20. You said that its conversion into a reality was a matter of days. On the faith of this I took a lovely villa on the Bay of Naples which I cannot inhabit as I have to take all my meals at the hotel. This is the simple truth." After writing the above he adds much lower down: "Your letter received to-day is dated *Monday* last—and Dowson wrote to me that he had given you £10 for me on Saturday. What does this mean? Will you write to him and ask an explanation? It seems a disgraceful thing of him to have said. I will write to him about it myself."

As a matter of fact poor, honest Ernest had only told the truth, and as the following pathetic document—sold as an autograph with all Smithers' other autograph letters—shows, he had eight days previously given Smithers the ten pounds for Wilde. Smithers may have wanted the use of it himself, proposing to

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forward it to Naples "in due course." This is Dowson's letter or memorandum:

" To L. SMITHERS.

" Oct. 14th, 97.

" DEAR SMITHERS,—I, to-day, deposit with you £45. 0. 0. Please send Oscar Wilde 10. 0. 0 on $\frac{a}{c}$ of what I owe him, take 1. 8. 3. on $\frac{a}{c}$ of interest paid by you for me and send me the balance at £3 every Monday to any address I may send you. Do not send me more than £3 each week. Yours truly,

" ERNEST DOWSON."

I call this a pathetic document, because of its mixture of formal commercialism (the two oughts in the shillings and pence column, for instance, where the deposit of £45 is mentioned) and lax Bohemianism ("1. 8. 3" and "10. 0. 0"). Then the mistrust of self. He knows he cannot keep money. Smithers must keep it for him, and, sure as he is that he will not be satisfied with the moderate allowance of three pounds a week which he has fixed for himself, he formally instructs Smithers to disregard the wild appeals, the alcoholic telegrams, which he can foresee himself making and sending.

Another document came into the autograph market, when the papers of Smithers were

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disposed of, which shows how Dowson's money was paid out. It is the balance-sheet of the transaction,¹ and the fact that a document

¹ I append the balance-sheet in question :

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It has been pointed out to me, by an officer in the Pay Corps, that this balance-sheet does not balance at all. That is more than likely.

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apparently so trivial should have found a purchaser shows, what has been known to his friends for some time—namely, that there is a great public interest in poor Ernest Dowson, who is by many connoisseurs and dilettanti in letters considered as a poet greatly superior to Oscar Wilde. On this opinion I have nothing whatever to say, because comparisons of this kind are doubly odious, and I thought it in Alfred Douglas's book particularly unfortunate for the author that he should so have insisted upon his own superiority as a poet to his friend, Oscar Wilde, and as a writer (presumably of *belles-lettres*) to Mr Justice Darling. I can say this however, that Oscar Wilde had a very high respect for Dowson's literary gifts, and showed him actual deference. Apart from his talents, Ernest Dowson was not at all the kind of man with whom Wilde would ever have cared to associate (to say nothing of admitting him to his friendship), for he was very untidy, even dirty, in his dress, neglecting himself utterly, with the deliberation of the penitent seeking in the humiliation of sackcloth and ashes and vermin the absolution of his follies and his sins. He was usually drunk, and, at most times, when so, noisy and boisterous. Yet Oscar Wilde, because he admired his genius, was at all times

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glad to see him. During those awful days of anxiety at Oakley Street, when he was out on bail between the second and third trials, he did not wish to see any of his friends except myself, for he said his nerves could not endure the presence even of those most kindly disposed towards him. But when one day I said to him : “ Oscar, may I bring Ernest Dowson to see you this evening? He would very much like to come,” he said, “ Oh, bring him by all means. He is an Oxford man and a fine writer of poetry and of prose, and it will do me good to have a *causerie* with him.” So I kept Ernest sober all that afternoon and in the evening took him round to Oakley Street, and he and Oscar sat together in the front room (where the bills were now rapidly accumulating unpaid in the lacquer rack) till long after it was dark. Neither of them spoke very much, and such remarks as were passed were mainly on matters artistic, but that evening was one of the pleasantest, as he told me, that, during his brief interval of liberty, Oscar Wilde enjoyed.

CHAPTER VI

My Last Interview with Oscar Wilde—Ernest Dowson's Name my Passport—How I met Dowson—His Literary Achievements—*The Comedy of Masks*—A Case of Neurasthenia—Oscar Wilde and Ernest Dowson—Ernest Dowson's Last Days—A Rencontre in the Bodega—The Bricklayer's Cottage at Catford—Ernest Dowson's Death—Wilde at Naples—Pen-Pictures of Lady Wilde.

ON the very last occasion when I saw Oscar Wilde alive—it was in Paris—it was Ernest Dowson's name that procured me admission to my friend. It was shortly after Dowson's death at my cottage in Catford, and on arriving in Paris I thought I would go and see Wilde and tell him about it. On arriving at the Hôtel d'Alsace in the rue des Beaux-Arts and asking to see "Monsieur Sebastian Melmoth," the *garçon* who had taken my name up to Oscar Wilde's rooms returned and informed me that "Monsieur Melmoss" was *desolé* not to be able to receive me, but that he was far too *fatigué* that morning to see anybody. Of course, if I had known what kind of habits Oscar Wilde had developed at that time—the poor fellow was seeking through drink to create for himself an artificial paradise in the real and palpable

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hell of his existence—I should never have called on him in the morning. But as I was leaving Paris that same afternoon, and could have no further opportunity of seeing him for some time (as it happened, I might write “for ever”), I wrote on a card: “Sorry to hear you are so tired, Oscar. I have come to Paris from Ernest Dowson’s deathbed—he died in my arms—and I thought you might like to hear about him and the messages he bade me take to you.” The waiter took this card up to Monsieur Melmoth and soon returned, asking me to follow him. The scene of my final parting from my old friend will be described in its proper place; the reason why it is referred to here is to show that Oscar Wilde’s interest in Ernest Dowson was so great that, although in a dreadful state of nerves, he was willing to admit a visitor to the room in which he was shaking and groaning, because that visitor had news to give of the poet whom he admired.

If he charged Dowson—whom he knew to be a man of the greatest delicacy in money matters—with acting disgracefully in alleging falsely to have made a payment, it was not because he really believed him to have told an untruth, it was simply because he was in a pitiful state of nervous irritability. He was writing abusive

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letters to everybody—I got my due share—even to the devoted Robert Ross. Everybody who has been through the mill knows what it is when one is in financial difficulties to have a sum of money dangled in front of one's eyes, but just out of one's reach.

I first met Dowson in London, at some Bohemian chambers in the Temple. Even in those days his future might have caused anxiety to his friends, for already at that time his visits were not welcomed. The tenant of those chambers, endowed with that racial *flair* which scents dissolution and reveals to those who possess it which men amongst their acquaintances are not going to be prosperous in life, was already treating him with coldness. Still, in those days his career was full of promise. He had written one novel, *The Comedy of Masks*, in collaboration, which was a commercial as well as an artistic success; he was welcomed as a contributor to the reviews which prided themselves on being guardians of the English language and the purity of style; he was known as the author of many beautiful poems. He was at that time living in the dock-house of a dock at Stepney, which is described in his first novel. It had come to him from his father. There was employment for him here, and an

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assured existence, amidst surroundings which might have appealed to his poetic nature. All the romance of the sea was brought to his very feet. The great ships which came into his dock for repair seemed like wounded sea-birds beating their wings upon his threshold. Animation, variety, colour embellished a scene over which the hundred different types of seafaring men from all parts of the world passed to and fro. But already in those days all things on this earth had lost their power of appealing to his heart or imagination. He hunted after suffering with the eagerness with which most men pursue pleasure.

I saw a good deal of him in London, and later on he came to me in Paris and asked to be allowed to sleep on the sofa in my workroom. His nerves were all gone. He told me he was *afraid* to enter the room in the hotel near the Gare Montparnasse where he lived. Before that dread came upon him, he had told me that there was a statue on his mantelpiece which filled him with terror. "I lie awake at night and watch it," he said. "I know that one night it means to come down off its shelf and strangle me." He was so nervous that he could not enter a shop to ask for anything. He was ever haunted with the perpetual dread of falling down paralysed. His was the most complete case of

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neurasthenia that I have ever witnessed. He could not even summon up the energy to open any letter that came for him. He delighted in self-abasement. In this way he flung ashes on his head. I remember once asking him, having met him after a long absence, what work he was doing, for I knew that he had been engaged on a novel. "Hack work!" he cried, with a laugh which had in it the exultation of the damned. He neglected his clothes wilfully, and always presented a dreadful appearance. That it had been wilful I learned when he was dying. In those last days I could give him no greater pleasure than to bring back home to our cottage a new shirt or a clean collar for him, and to put it on him.

The story I had to tell Oscar Wilde of the last days of the one of his friends for whom he had, I think, the most admiration and respect (next to Robbie Ross of course), was a sad one. I have told the story before elsewhere, but the book has for years been out of print and so I repeat it here. It is interesting in itself; as the story of the end of one of Oscar Wilde's friends it is of special interest and has its place here.

It was some months after he had returned to England that I saw him again. I heard that he had been very ill, and that he was living

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in a garret in the Euston Road. I visited him there one Sunday morning as I was on my way to King's Cross Station, where I was to take the train for a country house in Hertfordshire. I found him living at the top of a house exactly opposite St Pancras' Church. He was in bed, though it was past noon, and he told me that he had been lying there since the preceding Friday. I said that I hoped his wants had been attended to, and he said that his landlady supplied him with nothing but a small breakfast. "And I don't think that she will let me have that very long," he added; "for I am in arrears with my rent, and they are pressing me for it. Every morning now there is a note on my tray from the landlord asking me whether 'I consider myself a gent.'" I fetched him some provisions and a bottle of wine. On my return from Hertfordshire, the next afternoon, I went to see him again. I found him just as I had left him; he had not stirred from his bed. He was just too wretched and depressed to make any effort on behalf of himself. I induced him to get up, and I took him out. He showed me a small confectioner's shop where, he said, "I get my meals when I get any." It was a place where he could buy buns and glasses of milk. He told me that he was working for Smithers, who

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paid him weekly when he sent in his work, but that for weeks he had been unable to do any writing. I returned to see him several times, and each time found him lying in bed, often without having eaten anything for twenty-four hours. Then came a period of several days when I did not see him. I had my own spinning to mind, as they say in Yorkshire. One evening I went into the Bodega in Bedford Street to write some letters in the room downstairs. While I was writing, someone touched me on the shoulder. I turned round and started, for it was as if a being from the grave were standing by my side. It was poor Ernest. He told me that, though he was very ill, he had been driven by the threats of his landlord, who was an Italian music master, to leave his bed and go to the office of his publisher to appeal for help. Smithers had gone off on one of his holidays to Dieppe—with a glare in his eye and a bag full of sovereigns in his pocket—and had left a sarcastic note for Ernest Dowson. There was no chance of his getting any money, and he was trying to brace up his courage to return to the Euston Road and to face his landlord with empty hands. I asked him if half-a-sovereign would help him, and as I passed it to him I felt his hand. It was in an abominable state.

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“Dowson,” I said, “you are very ill, and I am not going to let you return to that place. You must come with me.” I told him that just then I was living in a cottage in Catford, of which the lower part was let out to a bricklayer and his wife ; but that I could give him a pleasant room to sit in, and that I would look after him until his affairs might take a turn. He said that he would be glad to come, for he had not the courage to wrangle for further grace at his lodgings. “But,” he said, “you must take me down to Catford first-class, for I cannot bear to be with people.” I remember that he was so weak that I had to take him in a cab to Charing Cross, and again in a cab from Catford Station to my home. He lived with me there just six weeks, the last days of his short life. My first desire after getting him home was to send for a doctor ; but he would not allow me to do so. He warned me that if I brought anyone to see him he would leave the house at once. We were not prosperous ; indeed, at that time I had been glad to take the task of writing a pamphlet on some new process of making white lead, and this pamphlet had to be produced in the intervals of attending to his wants. He often used to send me out to get medicines made up for him from prescriptions which he found in *Health in the*

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Home and similar publications. But the seal had been set upon his destiny. There were no remedies which could have saved his life. He was dying, though we did not know it, of galloping consumption. There was nothing to show how near the end was. He made good meals ; he was cheerful ; we used to laugh together, as I read him passages from my work, on the pass to which the Parnassians had come. Towards the end we used to sit together all day talking of literature and *les journées de Paris*. At times he put out his hand and touched mine and said that he was happy that he had met me. He read all the books that I had in the house, but *Esmond* was his favourite volume. He used to take it to bed with him, and it was by his side when he breathed his last. On the day before his death, towards evening, his condition began to cause me serious alarm. He had wished to dictate a letter to me, which was intended for his friend, the co-author of his novels. But he could not form the opening phrase. "I feel too tired," he said. Still I could not induce him that night to go to bed. He sat up till five in the morning, and even after he had retired to his room he kept shouting out to me not to go to sleep, but to talk with him. I remember that we discussed *Oliver Twist*, and to a remark

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I made that I did not think that for anything that Fagin could have told him Bill Sikes would have murdered Nancy he answered: "No, he would have gone for Fagin." He would not let me go to sleep. He wished to be convivial. At six in the morning he asked me to drink some Gilbey's port which was in his room. At eight he was coughing badly, and he sent me to the chemist's to get him some ipecacuanha wine, which he said relieved him. But after this, as he still continued to cough badly, I declared that the doctor must be fetched. The doctor arrived an hour after the poor fellow had died. I had gone downstairs to fetch something and as I was coming up again I called out: "You had better get up, Ernest, and sit in the arm-chair. You will breathe more easily." As I entered the room, a woman who was in attendance in the house pointed to the bed. I looked and saw that his forehead was bathed in perspiration. I went and raised him up, and while I was wiping his brow his head fell back on my shoulder. He was dead. I remember that the woman then asked me for two coppers to put on his eyes, and—which shows how poor we were¹—it was she who had to advance the coins.

¹ Grub Street has ever since repeated that I "made a very good thing out of Ernest Dowson." Had I not known the

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I shall have something more to say about Ernest Dowson lower down.

Wilde's letter containing the angry remark about Ernest Dowson was crossed by one from Smithers, accelerating the "due course" and forwarding the younger poet's money. Smithers, with characteristic duplicity (or, shall I use the milder word "pawkiness" instead?), seems to have taken credit to himself for having induced Dowson to pay the ten pounds on account, whereas we have seen that the repayment was a voluntary act on his part and was made as soon as ever any money came into his hands. Oscar Wilde writes on 27th October:

"Your letter with Ernest's £10 and the MS. were delivered on Monday last. The post is disgraceful here. It was very kind of you to secure the £10 for me—and I am much obliged. It has amongst other things enabled me to buy some writing paper of the cheaper kind—next week I hope to be able to buy a pen."

In January 1888 Oscar Wilde had left the Villa Guidice and was living at 31 Santa Lucia, address of one of his relations, an old gentleman at Lloyd's, to whom I wired and who came down and provided for everything, poor Ernest's wasted body would have had to have been buried by the parish.

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where moderately priced lodgings were obtainable. He writes on the 9th to Smithers a letter from which I extract the following passage with its threat of suicide :—

“ I have had many misfortunes since I wrote to you, influenza, the robbing during my absence in Sicily of *all* my clothes, etc., by a servant whom I left at the Villa, ill health, loneliness and general *ennui*, with a tragi-comedy of an existence—but I want to see my poem ¹ out before I take steps.”

When we come to deal with Oscar Wilde's life in Naples and Paris, during his last mournful years, we shall have to refer back to some of the passages quoted, because much that he says in his letters to Smithers has recently been contradicted by Lord Alfred Douglas in his book *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, but here and now—to use one of Alfred Douglas's favourite locutions—I would like to point out that while Alfred Douglas says that the Villa Guidice was taken by him, and kept up by him, and that there he entertained Oscar Wilde, whom he describes as penniless, and that when he left Naples he left Wilde in the villa as his guest, waited on by his (Douglas's) servants, Wilde's letters describe a

¹ *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.*

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very different position. According to what he writes to Smithers, it was he who took the Villa Guidice, which was without servants and not habitable, and these letters also show that in the month of October alone he received at least thirty-five pounds, in addition to his allowance of twelve pounds ten a month. My own information at the time I wrote my *Story of an Unhappy Friendship* (1902) was that he was the guest of Alfred Douglas, but that after a very short time his host was starved into leaving Naples and Oscar Wilde by the stopping of his allowance. I then also wrote: "On his side, Oscar Wilde was quite penniless. By selling their jewels, and even pawning their clothes, the two friends managed to prolong their resistance for a few weeks. I have heard accounts of this period, when every morning the excitable Italian *chef* used to clamour hysterically for the raw materials for his art, which would be humorous were not the whole story so sad." I did not know then that a sum of two hundred pounds was afterwards sent to Oscar Wilde by the Queensberry family to enable him to pay his debts and those of Alfred Douglas in Naples and thus to be in a position to separate.

The digression apropos of Oscar Wilde's

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liberality to Lady Wilde having led us far enough afield for the present, we may here return to his mother and quote two more descriptions of her. One pictures her as "a very tall woman—she looked over six feet high—wearing a long crimson silk gown which swept the floor. The skirt was voluminous, underneath there must have been two crinolines—this is perhaps what gave rise to the story of her wearing three dresses one over the other—for when she walked there was a peculiar swaying, swelling movement. The long, massive, handsome face was plastered with powder. Over her blue-black, glossy hair was a gilt crown of laurels. Her throat was bare, so were her arms, but they were covered with quaint jewellery. On her broad chest was fastened a series of large miniature brooches, evidently family portraits." These would be the cameos that I noticed during my call at Park Street.

Another lady gives a picture of Lady Wilde at her receptions, at Oakley Street, which may be compared with that of Madame de Brémont. This lady saw "a tall woman, slightly bent with rheumatism, fantastically dressed in a trained black and white checkered silk gown; from her head floated long, white tulle streamers, mixed with ends of scarlet ribbon. What

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glorious dark eyes she had! Even then, and she was over sixty, she made a strikingly handsome woman."

Her fine eyes were indeed Lady Wilde's most striking feature, a beauty which both her sons inherited. Willie's eyes were darker, but there was more expression in Oscar's, which glowed with the light of genius. In his Oxford days a poet, like himself winner of the Newdigate Prize for Poetry, wrote of him, "you with your wondrous eyes." Madame de Brémont says that on his death-bed Oscar Wilde reminded her strongly of Lady Wilde, whom, as we have heard, she knew very well. "Oscar Wilde seemed wrapped in slumber. The coarseness that of late years marred his features had been refined by the invisible hand of death. The beauty of his youth had returned, while his striking likeness to the face of his mother smote my heart with a pang of remembrance."

I have pointed out elsewhere that Oscar Wilde probably inherited from his mother also his eccentricity in the matters of dress and personal adornment. He was fond of large and noticeable jewels. Lord Alfred Douglas describes a large turquoise and diamond solitaire, which he and Oscar Wilde used to speak of as the "Hope-Not" in allusion—on the *lucus a non lucendo*

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principle—to the blue Hope diamond, which in those days was being much talked about, and relates that Oscar Wilde used to wear this in his shirt-front when in evening dress. It sounds almost incredible, even in Wilde, with his taste for the *outré*, and all I can say is that I never once saw him wearing the Hope-Not.

CHAPTER VII

Was Oscar Wilde Effeminate?—Madame de Brémont and his “Feminine Soul”—His Prediction about *De Profundis*—This Book as an Asset—The Poet’s Disappearance—*Sex and Character*—Genius and Athleticism—Ernest Renan and the Drill Sergeant—Oscar Wilde as a Man of Courage—The Interview with Lord Queensberry—Oscar Wilde and the Apaches—The Courage to live—“If.”

As I have related in my *Life of Oscar Wilde*, it was the earnest hope of Speranza, before her unfortunate son was born, that the expected child should be a girl. I had this on unimpeachable authority in Dublin and referred to it because it seemed to me to illustrate and to some extent explain one side of Oscar Wilde’s physiological composition.

Madame de Brémont, from whose interesting book I have already had occasion to quote, frankly speaks of his “feminine soul,” and in view of the authority which she may be held to possess, I wish here to cite the passage in which she sets forth her view and endeavours to establish it.

“It is to the soul of Oscar Wilde” (she writes) “that we must look for the solution of his

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paradoxical personality and genius. When the union of brain and soul is abnormal, the result is the genius. This phenomenon is due to the hybrid state wherein the soul and brain are bound by sexual antithesis. The feminine soul in the masculine brain-building creates the genius of man—while the masculine soul in the feminine brain-building creates the genius of woman. Therefore, to the soul in the wrong brain-building is due all that is great in art and wonderful in the world's progress. Oscar Wilde possessed the feminine soul. This was the ghost that haunted his house of life, that sat beside him at the feast and sustained him in the day of famine: the secret influence that weighted down his manhood and enervated his hope: the knowledge that he possessed the feminine soul; that he was a slave to the capricious, critical, feminine temperament, the feminine vanity and feminine weakness to temptation; the feminine instinct of adaptability, the feminine impulse of the wanton's soul, gave him the lust for strange, forbidden pleasures, and imparted to his final repentance the sublime abnegation of the Magdalene. And yet that same feminine soul endowed him with the supreme love and appreciation of beauty in every form, the music of words, the subtle harmonies of colour, imagery



OSCAR WILDE.
(Photo by Ellis & Walery.)

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in language, the coquetry of thought that veiled itself in paradoxes and the fine and delicate vision that created in him the instinct of the poet : the keen sense of feminine intuition in the analysis of character that made him the wit and dramatist of his day, and the feminine quality of vanity and appetite for flattery and praise that made him the first dandy of his time.

“ His secret antipathy to woman as woman, and his open admiration for man as man, was a further proof of his feminine soul. He has said : ‘ *The woman that would hold a man must appeal to the worst in him.*’ But there were two women that he did not include in this sweeping assertion, the one was his mother, and the other, his wife, both women that he well knew appealed to the best in his protean nature. He himself would have been a good and noble woman had his feminine soul been in its right place ; in feminine brain-building. He was doomed before his birth, hence the strange maternal spirit of divination that urged his mother to wish that the child she was about to bring into the world would be a girl. The mother instinct sensed the feminine soul that had taken form within her.”

Now I quote this passage from Madame de

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Brémont, not because I agree with it, but because it expresses the views of many people.

I cannot leave Madame de Brémont's book without quoting an anecdote, because everybody who knew Oscar Wilde will agree with what one of his most intimate friends and admirers said about it to me, one day when we were discussing the lady's monograph. She has met Oscar Wilde on a steamer on the Seine, the *bateau-mouche* to St Cloud, and she reports an extraordinary conversation which she had with him. In answer to one of her questions: "Why do you not write now?" he answers: "Because I have written all there was to write. I wrote when I did not know life; now that I do know the meaning of life, I have no more to write; life cannot be written, life can only be lived. I have lived." Again he says: "I have found my soul. I was happy in prison. I was happy there because I found my soul. What I wrote before I wrote without a soul, and what I have written under the guidance of my soul the world shall one day read; it shall be the message of my soul to the souls of men!"

I should say these are Oscar Wilde's *ipsissima verba*. I was once asked in a long letter from a Swedish professor (to whom I shall have occasion to refer again) this question, amongst

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others : “ Did you ever hear Wilde pronounce himself as to which of his own works he considered the most successful — from the point of view of technical perfection or otherwise ? ”

I preferred to let someone else answer this question—the man most qualified to answer it—and this is what he wrote :

“ Wilde constantly said that all his works were technically perfect and equally so. After his imprisonment he disliked all of them thoroughly and said they were inadequate expressions of his genius. He used to prefer *The Young King (House of Pomegranates)*. ”

I suppose that what he meant by what he had written under the guidance of his soul was the impersonal part of *De Profundis*, those parts pieced together with such consummate skill by Mr Robert Ross. The poor man can hardly have known how truly prophetic were his words : “ the world shall one day read. ” No book published in this century has been more widely or more universally read than *De Profundis*. During the trial of R. v. Crosland it was stated that of this book, leaving aside the large editions of translations, over half-a-million copies have been sold. Still to-day it is as good a property as any “ farm in Beauce, ” for the annual

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income it produces in royalties varies between four and five hundred pounds a year.

“ Again there was a pause. The revelation of that solemn moment was overpowering. I closed my eyes and pressed my hands to them to keep back the tears of real joy that filled my heart. God had been indeed merciful. God had rewarded that stricken genius beyond the power of man—yes, God was good. God had given him back his soul.

“ ‘ Comtessa,’ he said, ‘ don’t sorrow for me, but watch and pray—it will not be for long—watch and pray.’ ”

I can hardly fancy Oscar Wilde ever saying anything of the sort, and believe that Madame de Brémont’s memory must have betrayed her. She continues : “ His voice sank into silence. There was a long pause, broken only by the grating sound of the boat as it touched the pier. I strove to compose myself and waited for him to speak. Then I uncovered my face and turned to look at him—*but he was gone.*” The italics are my own.

“ Can you imagine Oscar reading that story ? ” asked my friend, “ and coming to the words, ‘ *but he was gone,*’ and can you not imagine the

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burst of his Olympian laughter. 'I raised my eyes, *but he was gone*?' "

This was, I agreed, just the kind of story, of writing, which would have appealed most strongly to his sense of humour. It is as a specimen of the anticlimax—a gem; the rapid evanescence of the bulky poet from a sea of—well, let us say—pathos, is comedy of a rich complexion.

It helps to the understanding of a man to be told by his intimates what were the things that amused him.

Lord Alfred Douglas made some comments, intended to be caustic or worse, on certain deductions I drew from the facts that Wilde's mother was a much stronger character than his father, and that not only had she hoped before Oscar's birth that the child would be a girl, but had brought him up and dressed him as a girl as long as it was possible to do so. My deductions were in the main inspired by that unhappy young Israelite man of genius, Otto Weininger, who committed suicide in Vienna, at the age of twenty-one, shortly after he had published his book, *Sex and Character*, doubtless because, as it is suggested in the preface to the eighth edition of the English version of that work, he could not bear to face his own ghastly

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revelations of psycho-physiological truth. My deductions were not apologetic; they were explanatory.

For my own part I never saw anything in Oscar Wilde to justify the charge of effeminacy against him. He always impressed me as a man, a man of masculine bent of mind. To begin with, I always considered him a genius, and genius is never associated with what is feminine. As to which Otto Weininger, *passim*, may be consulted for demonstration, pitiless and irrefutable. He certainly was not an athlete and had no fondness for sports. I remember once asking him if he had ever liked playing cricket, and he said: "No; the attitudes strike me as indecent." At school he never played at any games, but "used to flop about ponderously." As I record in the *Life*: "He never rowed on the lake; and he had for the musketry instructor and the drill sergeant contempt mingled with pity." Now none of these things ever suggested to me that my friend was unmanly. I have known so many men of talent and genius, who were men in every sense of the word, who eschewed physical exercise and exercises. I knew Victor Hugo very well. He never exercised his body. Daudet, before he became a cripple, used to dance when he needed

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relaxation. Zola was essentially what the Germans call an "Ofenhocker" (a man who sits by the stove all day) and the French designate as *un pantouflard*. The same may be said of Ernest Renan, as to whom it may be recorded that he also "had for the musketry instructor and the drill sergeant contempt mingled with pity." He once said to me, in his wonderful library in the École de France: "It is exceedingly lucky for me that I escaped military service. I simply could not have performed it. I should have deserted at the first opportunity, or I should have committed suicide." And that was Ernest Renan who spoke, the author of *The Life of Christ*. General Boulanger—and surely he was a man—was not even able to fence, as was demonstrated in his duel with Floquet. Oscar Wilde, it will be remembered, once sincerely regretted having no knowledge of the use of arms, so that, *more Gallico*, he might be able to defend himself against insult. It was only skill, and not courage that he lacked. As a matter of fact, he was essentially brave, both morally and physically. As to moral courage, the blackmailers of London, as we have seen, had reason to appreciate his quality in this respect. He was not to be "rented," as are the pusillanimous. "He only

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laughs at us ” and the compromising documents are handed over, without payment, save for a contemptuous dole. Where was finer moral courage displayed than by him, when, released on bail between the two criminal trials, he refused, in spite of the solicitations of at least one of his friends, to flee the country? “Oscar is an Irish gentleman and he will face the music.” Nor was there any braggadocio here; it was serene, quiet and virile courage. He was of good heart and played the man. I remember being with him one afternoon in Oakley Street during that dreadful period of *Sturm und Drang*, when Frank Harris came in and asked to take him out.

“Where do you think of going to?” said Oscar Wilde.

“Oh, to the Café Royal,” said Harris. “You must show them that you are not afraid of them, that you have nothing to fear.”

But Oscar Wilde shook his head. It would be unseemly, he pointed out. I confess I had applauded Harris’s suggestion, but I afterwards recognised that Oscar Wilde did right to refuse. And on that memorable occasion when Lord Queensberry came to his house in Tite Street, to demand that he should cease his friendship with Lord Alfred Douglas, can it be

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denied that here he showed fine courage? I know that in a letter describing the interview Lord Queensberry charged him with cowardice. "I don't believe Wilde will now dare defy me," he wrote—the letter was read out at his trial—"he plainly showed the white feather the other day when I tackled him."

Oscar Wilde did nothing of the sort, and even had he shown some nervousness, it would have been very unfair to charge him with cowardice. He was alone, his hostile visitors were two, and one of them at least—the Marquess—was known to him, not only as a violent and reckless man, but as a skilled pugilist. He seems to have comported himself with great dignity, to judge from his account of the incident given in the witness-box at the Queensberry trial—an account on which he was not cross-examined and of which no refutation was attempted.

"At the end of June 1894," he said, in answer to Sir Edward Clarke, "there was an interview between Lord Queensberry and myself in my house. He called upon me, not by appointment, about four o'clock in the afternoon, accompanied by a gentleman with whom I was not acquainted. The interview took place in my library. Lord Queensberry was standing by the window. I walked over to the fireplace, and he said to me:

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‘Sit down.’ I said: ‘I do not allow anyone to talk like that to me in my house or anywhere else. I suppose you have come to apologise for the statement you made about my wife and myself in letters you wrote to your son. I should have the right any day I chose to prosecute you for writing such a letter.’”

An acrimonious discussion ensued, during which Lord Queensberry accused Wilde of having written a disgusting letter to his son. The witness continued: “The letter was a beautiful letter and I never write except for publication.”

Lord Queensberry eventually announced: “If I catch you and my son together again in any public restaurant I will thrash you,” to which Wilde answered: “I do not know what the Queensberry rules are, but the Oscar Wilde rule is to shoot at sight.” Continuing his account, the witness added: “I then told Lord Queensberry to leave my house. He said he would not do so. I told him I would have him put out by the police. . . . I then went into the hall and pointed him out to my servant. I said: ‘This is the Marquess of Queensberry. . . . You are never to allow him to enter the house again.’”

I remember an occasion in Paris when I was with Wilde and some other friends in a thieves’

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kitchen—we had been exploring the slums. Some of the Apaches resented our presence, and hostile demonstrations were made against *les sales Anglais*. Some of our party showed distinct signs of trepidation, but Wilde seemed absolutely indifferent, and continued to joke and laugh. I imagine that the Apaches were much more impressed by his calm, as well as by his *costaud*¹ appearance than by the Don Whiskerandos' attitude which I assumed. Referring to this afterwards, Oscar Wilde said: "Robert was splendid. He defended us at the risk of our lives." He was a strongly built man and could have trained into athleticism if he had cared to do so. I remember watching him swimming in the sea at Berneval, like a Byron winning across the Hellespont, and saying to Robert Ross: "Nothing very effeminate about that performance, is there?"

I had always considered that the fact that he dragged out, after his downfall, which I date with his arrest, his miserable existence to the bitter end, without seeking surcease of sorrow in a way which must have suggested itself to him every day, perhaps every hour of his life, and which the examples of great men—recorded in those classics in which his soul was steeped—

¹ *Costaud*: Parisian slang word, meaning strong, sturdy.

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would commend, condone and consecrate, showed a rare courage in so true a pagan. That was before I had read *De Profundis*. I refer to the passage :

“ While I was in Wandsworth prison I longed to die. It was my one desire. When after two months in the infirmary I was transferred here, and found myself growing gradually better in physical health, I was filled with rage. I determined to commit suicide on the very day on which I left prison. After a time that evil mood passed away, and I made up my mind to live. . . . There is before me so much to do, that I would regard it as a terrible tragedy if I died before I was allowed to complete at any rate a little of it. I see new developments in art and life, each one of which is a fresh mode of perfection. I long to live so that I can explore what is no less than a new world to me.”

In a recent and magnificent poem, *If*, Rudyard Kipling writes :

“ If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they have gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them ‘ Hold on ! ’ ”

and when I read these lines I could not but

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think back on *De Profundis* and draw the conclusion that the poet draws, and, going from the general to the particular, confirm my view that Wilde was a man in the best sense of the word.

CHAPTER VIII

As to Wilde's Manliness and Courage—The Poet, the Painter and the Police—Oscar keeps the Door—An Escape by the Roof—Oscar Wilde and John Barlas—Barlas and his Muse at Charles Street—Oscar Wilde and the Cab-Drivers—Barlas on Wilde—Fatality for Wilde's Friends—Genius and Courage—Wilde's alleged Affectations—Wilde as a Talker.

AFTER he had left Oxford and was living in town Oscar Wilde one afternoon visited a friend of his, an artist well known at the time, who had a studio somewhere in Chelsea. He found his friend in a state of great distress and alarm, making hasty preparations as if for flight. He asked him what had occurred, and his friend said : " Oh, it's all up with me, Oscar. I am a ruined man." He described an offence he had committed, and added : " I am sure the parents have laid an information and that I am liable to be arrested at any moment. I am trying to get away before the police come."

" Then I'm afraid you're too late," said Oscar ; " and that they are here already, because as I came into the house I noticed two men hanging about the doorway, and I'm sure I recognised them as Scotland Yard men."

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“On hearing this,” said Oscar, in telling me the story “—— became frantic with alarm, talked of suicide, of throwing himself out of the window, of his disgrace and dishonour, and so forth. In the meanwhile I secured the outer door to the studio. ‘Is there no means of escape that way?’ I asked, pointing to the window. ‘Yes,’ he answered, with a hoarse croak. ‘I could clamber to the roof and away through ——’s studio three houses off!’ ‘Then do it at once,’ I said. ‘But they’re coming,’ he whimpered. ‘I can hear them on the stairs.’ ‘Oh, get along with you. I’ll keep the door against them long enough for you to manage your escape.’” And that is what the “effeminate” Oscar Wilde did for his unworthy friend. After some parleying—one can imagine Oscar’s part in the dialogue—the detectives began to force the door. In the end the lock gave way, and a moment later the police would have burst in. And then Wilde put his broad back against the door and held it fast against the invaders for a minute or two longer, long enough in any case to give the fugitive time to make good his escape. “They were furious,” continued Oscar, “and spoke of arresting me for resisting the police in the execution of their duty. But I pacified them by saying that as I knew my friend,

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the artist, had left London that morning in a great hurry for the Continent, I had thought it was some studio practical joke that was being played on me."

"Your feat," I said, "reminds one of the exploit of Catherine Douglas, who held the door against the men who had come to murder the King. . . . By the way, do you know John Barlas, who is her direct descendant? You remember, Catherine Douglas won the name of the 'Bar Lass.'"

I forget when Oscar Wilde first met John Barlas, but I remember taking the Scottish poet to our rooms in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square, where a number of poets — John Davidson amongst others—used occasionally to meet. I had made Barlas's acquaintance at New College, Oxford, where his rooms were opposite mine on the ground floor of the extreme right-hand side of the first quadrangle. Already at Oxford he was known as eccentric, but was considered a genius and was appreciated as a poet. Oscar Wilde always had a respect for 'Varsity men, and I think that he had a good opinion of John Barlas, who had done well in the schools and would have done better but for a love of romance and adventure which interfered with his studies. He had a very excitable

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brain and was very quarrelsome. I used to think of him as the "young Lochinvar," and he dearly loved fighting. Wilde was very nice and complimentary to him during his afternoon at Charles Street, and had not shown any surprise at his having brought with him a weird young female, whom he introduced as his sister-soul and Muse. It appeared she lived in a room adjoining his in an awful slum in Lambeth, and that, like himself, she professed anarchy and, as he confided to us, wore flannel under-things of a blood-red hue to show the colour of her convictions. She was hardly a person to bring to so "respectable" a house as the one in Charles Street, kept by a retired butler, who used to go out and resume his functions whenever the Governors of the Bank of England gave a dinner-party, and who would have swooned if he had caught a glimpse of the red *dessous* of the sister-soul from Hercules Buildings, Lambeth. But there was nothing snobbish about Oscar Wilde — *pace* Lord Alfred Douglas — and he received this weird young lady, because she was Barlas's friend, as courteously as though she had been Lady This or Lady That. Barlas, however, conceived a grouch; he thought that the sister-soul had not been treated with due reverence. We all left Charles Street together,

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Barlas and the Muse ahead, followed by Wilde, Davidson and myself. Suddenly Barlas was seen to signal to a hansom. It came up and the lady was bundled into it, followed by the poet, who rebuked us all in general, and Oscar Wilde in particular, for our want of respect to the sister-soul. It appears he thought that Oscar Wilde should have offered his arm to the lady, and so have escorted her across Grosvenor Square, which would have been a sight for the gods. Poor Barlas's heroic exit was spoiled, however, by the cabman, who, when he heard what address he was expected to drive to, said he didn't "know about that"; it was a roughish neighbourhood, and was he sure of getting his fare. And then Oscar Wilde, who hated a scene worse than any man, and who might justly have been piqued by Barlas's unreasonable behaviour, stepped forward and smilingly assured the cabman, who knew him by sight and addressed him as "my lord," that it was all right, and thus saved the situation.

Oscar Wilde, by the way, was always very popular with cab-drivers, and was, perhaps, better known to them than any man in London. "He was the best rider in Chelsea," was the description of him given to me at the time of his trial by a sympathetic Jehu; he must have

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spent much money with the craft. This dialogue between him and Mr Carson at the time of the Queensberry trial will be remembered.

“ Is Park Walk about ten minutes’ walk from Tite Street ? ”

“ I don’t know. I never walk.”

“ I suppose when you pay visits you always take a cab ? ”

“ Always.”

“ And if you visited, you would leave the cab outside ? ”

“ If it were a good cab.”

Some little time after the Grosvenor Square incident, Barlas fell into the hands of the police. He had rushed out of Hercules Buildings early one morning and had discharged a revolver against the Houses of Parliament, “ to show his contempt for them,” he explained to the police. Oscar Wilde, who traced his excitement to the influence of his *Théroigne de Méricourt*, immediately went bail for him, and afterwards became one of his sureties to be of good behaviour. Some of the papers blamed Mr de Rutzen for his leniency, and, of course, Wilde came in for malevolent aspersion. I know that he did not care. He acted as he did, not only from kindness of heart, but also because he respected John Barlas and admired him.

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Barlas heartily reciprocated his respect and admiration, as he showed in an article contributed to some forgotten magazine, whose name I do not recall. I give the following extracts from this article¹—a manuscript copy of which I possess—because they illustrate the opinion on Wilde held by a man whom many contemporaries look upon as a poet of genius, who was a scholar and a man of lofty ideals and great courage, universally liked and respected at Oxford and elsewhere :

“ High genius is always symbolic, or typical. The subject of this sketch is a perfect type. In life, in style, in thought, he is the artist among us. . . . ”

“ From the first he was a critic in art, and he is now the artist of criticism. Concentration and universality are great gifts not often found together ; the gift of the creative artist is not often united in one person with the gift of the sterile critic. Oscar Wilde has both ; he can make beautiful things of a distinct type ; he can enjoy beautiful things of every type. . . . But he has said himself that he holds the critic

¹ The printed version—it appeared in April 1892—differs considerably from the manuscript from which I quote.

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greater than the artist ; holds him who dwells in the palace greater than him who built it. . . .

“ Creation is necessary and contemplation delightful to God and man alike. We must all make something. Most of us have to build houses or bridges of brick or stone, or to till the earth. But if we build our houses religiously, we make them into temples, and the fruits of the earth we can offer to God—a Cain’s offering openly rejected, but dear to Him in His sacred heart. Other few of us are privileged to weave rainbows out of colours, and dreams out of rainbows ; to build with things of the spirit. These are artists. God alone can make the stars.”

He then quotes some passages of Wilde’s criticisms, and proceeds :

“ This is astral music and if he who wrote it has not lived aforesaid in Egypt and Syria, in violet-crowned Athens and Dante’s own city of flowers, I have misunderstood the music. . . . He does not seem quite so inspired when he speaks of Italy and her painters. It may be that, after all, he never heard from Botticelli’s lips of the strange heresies he painted upon the

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cold rebellious faces of his Madonnas, nor left his art for awhile to plunge into the mysteries of occult science with the pupil of Verrocchio, artist and lover of all beautiful things, nor listened to the silent painted music of Giorgione. It was Walter Pater who did all that.

“ But criticism pure and simple makes only the middle period of Oscar Wilde’s development. He began as a critical poet in verse, and he ends as a symbolic poet in prose. He is the first poet-novelist of England. Fielding, Dickens, Thackeray were novelists, not poets. Shelley wrote some novels when he was very young, but left prose for poetry. The poetry of Scott is better seen in his poetry than in his novels. In France it is otherwise. Hugo, Flaubert and Gautier were poets of prose. The creator of Gilliat’s heroic love and Jean Valjean’s holy sufferings was a poet ; he who saw the snake-skin slippers of Salammbô in the marble bath tank of her scarlet room, and waded through the massacre of the valley of the Battle-Axe, and beheld lions crucified, was a poet ; he who loved a woman he had never seen and gave her the hands of Magdalen, the body of sleeping Antiope, the raiment of an earlier queen, and who found her in the flesh in strange disguise and made her his own for but a single night, was

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a poet ; and he who has clothed the mystery of the Phoenix in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a prince of poets. And this leads us to his earlier poetry in verse. The personality of the man we know is already there ; the love of colours, of bright birds and beautiful gems—the love of curious gems came later ; the deep, sensuous enjoyment of Nature that recalls Keats and the Roman poets, especially Virgil and Ovid ; the critical spirit of Greece strangely blended with the religious fervour of Catholic Christianity ; the god-like calm, the Titan-like defiance, the swift and gentle irony, vivid and lambent and harmless to spiritual life as sheet lightning, but terrible to those who know what it means. But a man who is all this and when fate has cast him upon these latter days, cannot fail to be a revolutionist, and this voluptuous artist is a very Michael, or rather, a Raphael for he does not use physical means, but spiritual. Nor are his spiritual weapons of the coarser kind, noisy and explosive. He does not use dynamite, but a dagger whose hilt is crusted with flaming jewels and whose point drips with the poison of the Borgias. That dagger is the paradox. No weapon could be more terrible. He has stabbed all our proverbs and our proverbs rule us more than our kings.

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“Perhaps it is better to say that he uses sheet lightning. With a sudden flash of wit he exposes to our startled eyes the sheer, cliff-like rift which he has opened out, as if by a silent earthquake, between our moral belief and the belief of our fathers. That fissure is the intellectual revolution.”

A singular fatality has dogged the steps of Oscar Wilde's friends. Many have come to a sad end, and of some of those who survive it may be said that they are not the luckier ones. Consider the sudden and unlovely death of Lionel Johnson, who fell back inanimate from off the high stool of a bar counter; the lingering agony of consumption, aggravated by want, of Ernest Dowson; the dreadful suicide of John Davidson, and other illustrations which might be given. Poor John Barlas was to endure a fate even worse, to linger on for years, a physical wreck, with a mind diseased, in Gartnavel Asylum. I heard from him thence in the present year (1914). He was unable to write himself, but dictated the letter to his wife, who seems faithfully to have transcribed his words. It was a sad thing to read such a letter after reading the essay from which I have quoted above, but there is one curious thing about it

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which strikes me now. He has told me quite lucidly of the enormous output of plays and poems which he has achieved since last we met, twenty years ago, but then trails off into a mysterious account of visions he has of "trains full of corpses." The poet (*vates*) is a visionary and a prophet, and to the "innocent," it is said, second sight is given. Can his disordered brain have foreseen the impending horrors of battle and massacre? ¹

Sufficient proof has, I think, been given that it is wrong to speak of Oscar Wilde as effeminate, by reason of a want of courage, physical and moral. And all the more credit should be given him for the quality which he displayed, that

¹ The following extract from a letter written by Barlas to his son in 1905, quoted from Mr David Lowe's brochure on the poet, will be read with interest :—

" You may have heard that I knew Oscar Wilde pretty well at one time, both in Paris and London, and we sometimes dined together with other friends and acquaintances in the latter mighty city. He was and remains my ideal of a man of genius in this generation . his words were as splendid as his writings, turned and spoken with exquisite grace, and half concealing under an appearance of sportive levity unheard-of profundity of perception and thought. He read the very innermost souls of men. We have had none like him for this power since Shakespeare. His misfortunes were an extraordinary example of the power of slander and of Capital. So long as he left the pocket unassailed he prevailed over all the lies and libels of the jealous ; but his article in *The Fortnightly Review* on Socialism brought all the hornets upon him."

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courage seems to diminish in a man in proportion to his intellect. The Napoleon of the Pont d'Arcole was, no doubt, a hero in the popular sense of the word. The mentally developed Napoleon of the retreat from Moscow was so little courageous that, in deadly fear of falling into the hands of the Cossacks, after narrowly escaping them in a raid, he ordered his physician to prepare him a sachet of poison, which he could wear round his neck and which could be used as a last resource if he were to be captured. The contents of this sachet he did eventually swallow—it was on the night before the abdication of Fontainebleau—but the strength of the poison had evaporated and he only succeeded in making himself very sick and in giving great alarm to the faithful Ménéval. The stronger the imagination—and consequently the greater the power to conceive the horrors of pain and death—the less will the courage be. Wise old age is timorous and shy of danger ; immature youth is heroic and reckless. I think of Oscar Wilde, that inasmuch as he was undoubtedly a man of genius, his courage was quite remarkable. He was not a bully nor a swashbuckler. Unlike Alfred Douglas, who tells us that in Paris he challenged numerous people to duels, he never issued a cartel, but bore his enemies

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down by the serene force of his courage. He had that dignity and calm which suggest strength.

One has heard his affectations of speech referred to as a proof of effeminacy. Now I do not think that any of his friends ever heard him speak otherwise than in a perfectly natural, albeit highly distinguished, manner, when he was not on the stage. By being "on the stage," I mean when he was playing to the gallery, amazing the public, posturing for the sake of notoriety, for the sake of the ultimate benefits which in a commercial age and country notoriety is supposed to bring. I know that I never did, never once. It would have bored, or it would have irritated me, and while I never experienced one second's *ennui* during all the hours I have spent in his company, I cannot conceive any man ever having been irritated by Oscar Wilde. His company was sheer delight. He had certain little catch phrases or expressions—who has not?—such as "perfectly charming" and "rather tedious"—but they were so skilfully used and so amusingly applied that they never produced the annoyance of the gag. He had also certain philological dislikes. For instance, he used to say that to use or to hear any word ending in "ette"—such as "leaderette," "flannelette," and so on—literally put his teeth on edge. Had

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he lived he would have harboured a grievance against Mrs Pankhurst, because of the designation of her followers. Yet, curiously enough, it was a word ending in "ette" which expressed what played so vast a rôle in his physical life, a word which, had he been restricted to a vocabulary of only ten words, would certainly have been one of them, if not the first—namely, "cigarette." It was doubtless his fondness for what it described that made him accord to this word with the hated suffix the high honour of admission—the *grandes entrées*—into his poems. It is found once, and is fitted with a jingle partner in that wonderful poem, *The Harlot's House*, which I saw and heard him compose in Paris. Here are the lines :

" Sometimes a horrible marionette
Came out, and smoked a cigarette
Upon the steps like a live thing."

With regard to the apparent extravagance of his language in public discourse as well as in his writings, let me once again quote one of the questions put to me by the Swedish professor, and the answer given to it. They contain, besides the explanation sought after, other information of interest.

The Swedish professor asks me : " Had Wilde

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any very genuine first-hand knowledge of Greek literature, beyond what readings in it were indispensable for him to have when he took his Oxford degree? Did he read any Greek books in later years, or did he maintain his classical scholarship chiefly by studying the works of others, scientific productions (Mahaffy, etc.)? You have, of course, noticed in many of Wilde's writings a frequent occurrence of words and groups of words like these: honey-coloured, fiery-coloured, scarlet plume, scarlet thread, jasper cave, purple air, purple darkness, the purple dignity of tragedy, etc., as of various names of flowers, such as anemones, narcissus, crocus, hyacinth, iris, and so on. Now, I wonder are these reminiscences of classical poetry?"

To these questions the following answer was given: "Wilde won the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek at Dublin, at the age of seventeen, his essay being on the Greek Comic Poets. He obtained a Greek scholarship at Magdalen and took a first in *Literæ Humaniores* for his degree, which was classical. Any writer who has enjoyed these scholastic distinctions generally retains something of his classical education. Wilde is, therefore, hardly an exception. As he never worked at Oxford and went to Greece for a couple of terms, when he should have been at

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ΑΡΙΣΤΟΦΑΝΟΥΣ

οὐδὲν ὀρθῶς, ὄλλ' ἄνω τε καὶ κάτω κυδοισοπᾶν 585
 ὥστ' ἀπειλεῖν φησιν αὐτῇ τοὺς θεοὺς ἐκάστοτε
 ἡνίκ' ἂν ψευσθῶσι δείπνου κατώσιν οἴκαδε, ^{εστὶ τὸ ἐπι}
 τῆς ἐορτῆς μὴ τυχόντες κατὰ λόγον τῶν ἡμερῶν. 620
 κἄθ' ὅταν θύειν δέη, στρεβλοῦτε καὶ δικάζετε ^{αὐτῆς}
 πολλάκις δ' ἡμῶν ἀφ' αὐτῶν τῶν θεῶν ἀπαστῖαν, 590
 ἡνίκ' ἂν πενθῶμεν ἦτοι Μέμνον' ἢ Σαρπηδόνα,
σπένδεθ' ἡμεῖς καὶ γελᾶτ' ἀνθ' ὧν λαχῶν Ἰπέρβολος
 τῆτες ἱερομνημονεῖν, κἄπειθ' ὑφ' ἡμῶν τῶν θεῶν
 τῶν στέφανον ἀφηρέθη· μάλλον γὰρ οὕτως εἴσεται
 κατὰ σελήμην ὡς ἀγειν χρὴ τοῦ βίου τὰς ἡμέρας. 595

summetres
his case

19 solar years 6940 days. Abbe Halsted
meta dies totius solar solman year together,
every 19 years is every year intercalary
but perhaps meton too early.
clouds 424.

ΣΩΚΡΑΤΗΣ ΣΤΡΕΨΙΑΔΗΣ ΧΟΡΟΣ

ΣΩ. μὰ τὴν ἀναπνοὴν μὰ τὸ χάος μὰ τὸν ἀέρα
 οὐκ εἶδον οὕτως ἄνδρ' ἀγροικον οὐδένα
 οὐδ' ἀπορον οὐδὲ σκαῖον οὐδ' ἐπιλήσμονα
 ὅστις σκαλαθυρμάτι ἄττα μικρὰ μανθάνων 630
 ταῦτ' ἐπιλέλησται πρὶν μαθεῖν ὅμως γε μὴν
 αὐτὸν καλῶ θύραζε δευρὶ πρὸς τὸ φῶς
 ποῦ Στρεψιάδης; εἴξει τὸν ἀσκάντην λαβῶν 600
 ΣΤ ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔωσι μ' ἐξενογκεῖν οἱ κόρηις
 ΣΩ. ἀνύσας τι καπάθου καὶ πρόσεχε τὸν νοῦν. ΣΤ ἰδοῦ
 ΣΩ. ἄγε δὴ, τί βούλει πρῶτα νυλὶ μανθάνειν 605
 ὧν οὐκ ἐδιδάχθης πάποτ' οὐδέν; εἰπέ μοι.
 πότερα περὶ μέτρων ἢ ῥυθμῶν ἢ περὶ ἐπῶν, ^{verses}

from 600 to 605
600

ΑΔΝΟΤΑΤΙΟ ΚΡΙΤΙΚΑ

591 vulgo ἢ τὸν || 607 vulgo ἢ περὶ ἐπῶν ἢ ῥυθμῶν emendavit G Hermannus, ita ut iclus rectius caderet atque ordo fieret et sequentibus et ipsi rei consentaneus

(134)

Facsimile of a page from Oscar Wilde's copy of the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, used by him at Oxford in 1887, which contradicts the statement that "he never worked at the University."

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the University (for which his scholarship was temporarily taken away) and still got a first in every examination, we may safely conclude that he retained the scholarship acquired at Dublin. His memory was always extraordinary and perhaps too retentive. He often reproduced phrases of other writers unconsciously. No doubt the vocabulary referred to by the Doctor had its origin from the same source. Theocritus, and, of course, Plato, were the only Greek authors he read carefully in later life."

Although Oscar Wilde was a great talker—I myself have charged him that Balzac's definition of the demi-artistes, who spend their lives in talking themselves (*passent leurs vies à se parler*), might be applied to him—he never imposed his conversation on people. He talked nobody down, as there are some who do, and amongst the least obscure. If he seemed to pontify, it was because he was such a delightful talker, and had a voice so melodious, that people simply stopped talking themselves, inviting him by their silence to continue. Do not the naturalists describe for us some bird, as to which they tell us that when it begins to sing a hush falls upon the whole grove, vocal till then? One simply had to listen, and was led from delight to delight, from surprise to surprise. I

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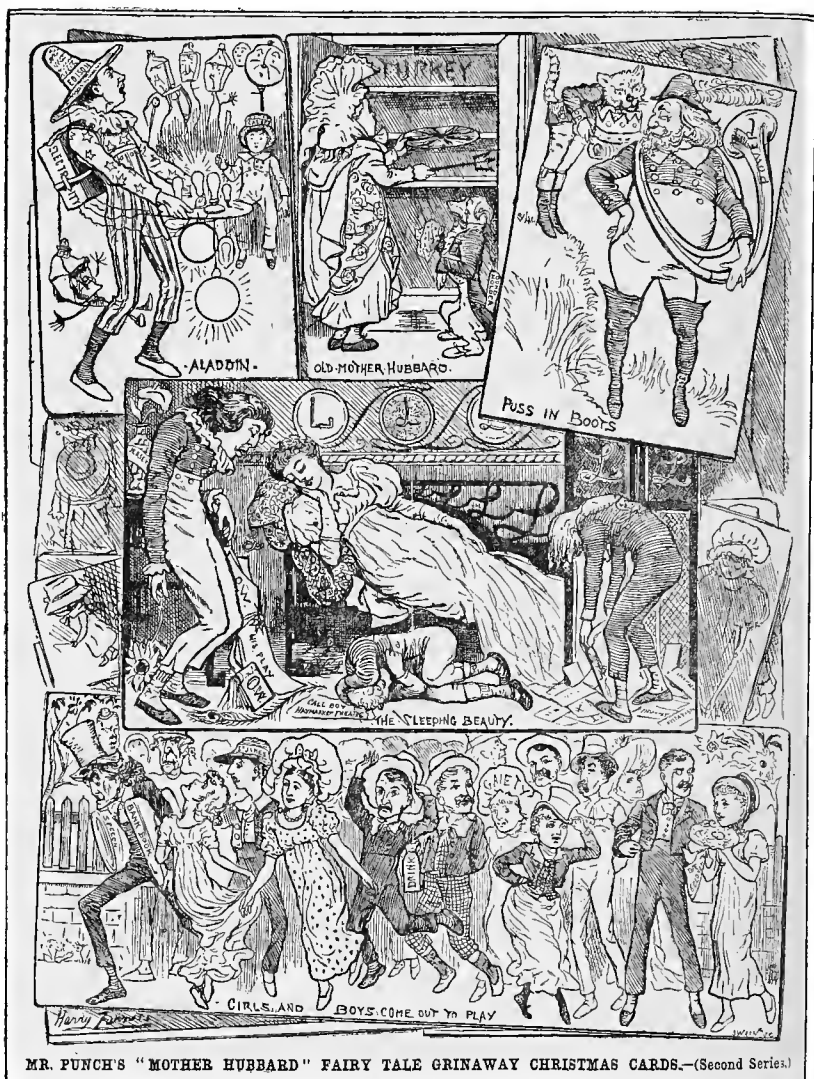
have never anywhere in the world met anybody even faintly resembling him in this gift. His conversation was indescribable. It charmed, touched, amused, inspired. One felt an enthusiasm for the man as one listened to him, the kind of enthusiasm that one experiences for Nature at the spectacle of some grand piece of scenery, some light on sea or land. One was lifted out of oneself. In regard to voice, Sarah Bernhardt, on whom Oscar somewhat modelled himself, has the same fascination, the same power to move.

CHAPTER IX

Oscar Wilde's Absolute Discreetness—The Charge of Effeminacy—Oscar Wilde and Alcohol—Alfred Douglas's Indictment—My own Experience—"Ballooning"—"Vine-Leaves in the Hair"—Oscar Wilde a Freemason—A Prison *Rencontre*—The "Sign of the Widow's Son"—Wilde's Reluctance to respond—The Reason for it—The Two Governors of Reading Gaol—Two Documents—Wilde's Absolute Secrecy—The Murderer and the Judge.

It is an accepted fact that an essentially feminine weakness is a want of discretion, an inability to keep a secret. I should say that these weaknesses were never less to be found in a man than they were in Oscar Wilde. He was, as far as I observed him, the most discreet of men. I suppose, like every other young man, he had had his *amourettes*. Indeed, one of them was at one time a matter of public notoriety, and few of us have forgotten the article, "Elle et Lui," which appeared in the *Echo de Paris* and which very transparently described the Irish poet and his famous *inamorata*, as minutely observed and pitilessly analysed by a celebrated Parisian *chroniqueur*, who had frequently seen them together. It was a *liaison* of which any man might have been vain, of which many men

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Oscar Wilde in a Christmas Card

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would have boasted. I never once heard Oscar Wilde mention the lady's name, any more than I ever heard him refer to any of his adventures or *bonnes fortunes*. Of course, Wilde was a gentleman. Now gentlemen are not supposed to do these things, but unfortunately many gentlemen do, if not by direct statement, at least by suggestion. But I am not defending Wilde here on a charge frequently brought against him of being a fop and an egotist steeped in vanity—the very kind of vanity which sets men cackling about their triumphs in this field—I am trying to point out that the charge of effeminacy here also falls to the ground. Even under the sinister effects of alcohol, which was the *fons et origo* and alone, of his downfall and ruin, every foolish thing that he ever did having been conceived and executed when he was under its baleful influence, his reticence on subjects on which honour bound him to be silent appears to have been absolute. I say “appears,” because for my part I never once, during all the years I knew him, saw Oscar Wilde under the influence of drink. Lord Alfred Douglas states that towards the end, in Paris, Wilde frequently got intoxicated after dining with him, and would say: “Excuse me, my dear fellow, but I perceive I am drunk,” and would lumber heavily from the

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room. I am afraid that there is no doubt that during his last miserable years in Paris he did seek this artificial paradise out of a real and palpable hell, and I am afraid also that I do not see what else he could very well have done to fill the "unforgiving minute." When I visited the Hôtel d'Alsace after his death his landlord, showing me his room, told me: "He used to work at nights, all night long. As a rule he would come in at one o'clock in the morning and sit down to his table, and in the morning he would show me what he had written, and 'I have earned a hundred francs to-night,' he would say. . . . Towards the end it became very difficult for him to write, and he used to whip himself up with cognac. A litre (seven-eighths of a quart) bottle would hardly see him through the night." The landlord then pointed through the window to the little courtyard of the hotel and said: "And there is the table where Monsieur Melmoth used to sit and take his absinthe." I will add, though, that the landlord said he had never seen him drunk. "*Parfois entre deux vins ça se peut,*" he admitted; "*mais saoul, ça jamais*" (A bit "squiffy," perhaps, at times, but drunk, never). Well, during all the years I knew him, I never even once saw him *entre deux vins*. The only occasion

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I remember when there was merely a suggestion of anything of the kind—the suggestion came from him—was once when we had been dining together at Maire's with another friend, and as we were walking back along the boulevards Oscar said: "I really think, Carlos, that we must have had too much wine at dinner. We are ballooning." In those days he seemed to consider excessive drinking as a want of manners.

One remembers how indignant he was with the cross-examining counsel who suggested that at a certain dinner-party he had deliberately caused too much wine to be served. In answer to Carson's question: "Did you give him plenty of wine at dinner?" he angrily replied: "As I have said before, anyone who dines at my table is not stinted in wine. If you mean, did I ply him with wine, I say 'No!' It's monstrous, and I won't have it." He had previously said that any guest of his was welcome to as much wine as he liked, but that he considered it "extremely vulgar" for anyone to take too much.

It was, by the way, apropos of wine that during this cross-examination he made one of his most effective hits of repartee:

"Do you drink champagne yourself?" asked Mr Carson.

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“Yes,” was the answer; “iced champagne is a favourite drink of mine—strongly against my doctor’s orders.”

“Never mind your doctor’s orders, sir,” retorted Mr Carson.

“I never do,” said Oscar Wilde.

Beyond that it was vulgar to get drunk, I never heard him express an opinion on the subject. I will admit, though, that when everybody was talking about Ibsen’s plays, Wilde was much attracted by the phrase, “coming home with vine-leaves in his hair,” and it occurred to me that if he thought of a man as “with vine-leaves in his hair” he would think less badly about him, and the vulgarity of his act, than if the fact that the man was drunk presented itself to him. Let us think of him then, in those mournful days and still more mournful nights in Paris, not ever as *entre deux vins*, but just “with vine-leaves in his hair.”

And though he did all the foolish and all the evil things that ruined his life when in this condition, as when he laid his information against Lord Queensberry, as when he sought out those inexplicable companionships which disgraced him, if he was reckless and sacrificed himself, no more then than when his hair was

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free of the *pamphre* did he allow his tongue to involve or implicate others.

As an instance of his absolute discretion, I will mention the fact that though I knew him from 1883 till the year of his death, I was never aware that he was a Freemason. It was only late in this year (1914) that I heard for the first time that he was admitted to the brotherhood at Oxford on 25th May 1876 (May the 25th, by the way, was, as may be observed, an important date in Oscar Wilde's life). I heard it for the first time from a mutual friend, not a Mason himself, who had discovered the fact one day when Oscar Wilde was turning out some papers in his library in Tite Street and disclosed two Masonic documents, his certificate of admission to the order, and another referring to some promotion in degree. After that he sometimes referred to this status of his when speaking with this friend, and it was to him that he told an amusing story of how he met a brother Mason in Reading Gaol.

“ It was towards the end of my time, and one day as I was walking round and round the ring in the prison-yard at exercise, I noticed a man, another prisoner, signalling to me. He was a perfect stranger to me. I could see from his clothes—he was not in prison dress—that he



United Grand Lodge
OF ANCIENT, FREE AND ACCEPTED MASONS OF ENGLAND.

His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, R. G.
GRAND MASTER.

In All Whom it may concern

These are to certify that our Brother Oscar O'Flaherty Mills Wilde who hath signed his name on the Margin hereof was regularly received into Free Masonry on the 28th day of February A.D. 1875 & was admitted to the Third Degree on the 25th day of May 1875. in the Apollo University Lodge No 357. Oxford & that he is duly registered in the Books of this Grand Lodge accordingly.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto subscribed my Name and affixed the Seal of the Grand Lodge at London the 29th day of May A.D. 1876.

This Certificate shall not oblige a Brother's conduct in any Lodge without due Examination.

Quantumvis

quibus adinventum haec Sicut Oscar O'Flaherty Mills Wilde

qui in nomine suum in mense scriptis in diploma nostro nomine Apollo University numero 357. Ox. ford.

28^{to} die Februarii A.D. 1875. huius fratrem in primo gradu occultae scientiae Initium vel artes edificatae inauguratum esse necnon debito tempore ad secundum et hunc denique ad tertium gradum admissum. nomenque eius in actis nostris nostri concilii recte recensitum esse. In capite hoc testimonium no. in nomine nostrum subscriptum sigillamque impressam summi concilii apposuit.

Deditur latum hoc 29^{to} die Mensis Maii A.D. 1876. Et mandatum est ut nomen eius commemorandi prout et approbati quod in conclusionem versandi facultas daretur.



Johannes Hervey G. SEC.

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was a prisoner on remand. I took no notice of him at first, because at that time I was on the Governor's good books. Major Nelson had been very kind to me—and I did not want to get reported for communicating with another prisoner in the exercise yard. It is a grave offence. I had been punished once before."

He was here referring to an incident which he described in his own inimitable style to André Gide.

"Those who are in prison for the first time," he said, "recognise one another by the fact that they are unable to converse without moving their lips. . . . I had been locked up for six weeks, and during that time I had not spoken a single word to a single soul—to a single soul. One evening we were marching one behind the other, during the exercise hour, and suddenly, behind me, I heard my name spoken; it was the prisoner who was behind me who was saying: 'Oscar Wilde, I pity you, for you must suffer more than we do.' I had to make an enormous effort not to be observed (I thought that I was going to faint), and I said, without turning round: 'No, my friend, we all suffer alike.' And that day I had no longer the faintest desire to kill myself. We spoke thus together for several days running. I got to know his name and

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what his trade was. His name was P——; he was an excellent fellow! But I had not yet learned how to talk without moving my lips and one evening: 'C.3.3.' (it was I who was C.3.3.) 'and A.4.8. leave the ranks.' We left the ranks, and the warder said: 'You will have to go before the Governor.' And as pity had already entered into my heart, I was alarmed only for my companion, absolutely on his account alone. For myself, I was pleased to think that I should suffer on his account. But the Governor was altogether terrible. He made P—— come in first; he wished to question us apart—for I must tell you that the punishment is not the same for the man who has spoken first, and thus began the conversation, as for him who answered. The punishment is double for the man who speaks first; usually the former gets fourteen days' cells, and the latter only seven. So the Governor wished to know which of us had spoken to the other first. And naturally, P——, who was a very good fellow, said that it was he. And when, afterwards, the Governor had me brought in and questioned me, naturally I said that it was I who had spoken first. Then the Governor turned very red, because he could not follow us in his understanding. 'But P—— says also that it was he who began to talk. I cannot make it



Supreme Council of the XXXIII. Degree

OF THE
ANCIENT AND ACCEPTED SCOTTISH RITE OF H.R.D.M. K.H.

GRAND PATRON,

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS ALBERT EDWARD PRINCE OF WALES, K.G. 33rd

From the East of the Grand Council of the Sovereign Grand Inspectors General of the ANCIENT AND ACCEPTED RITE OF H.R.D.M. K.H. of England and Wales, and all the Dependencies of the British Crown under the C.C. of the Zenith, sitting at London, N.L. 51° 31' Long. 6° W. M. Greenwich.

WE DO ALL Illustrious Grand Inspectors General; to all Most Valiant and Sublime Princes of the Royal Secret; to all Grand Inquisitor Commanders; and to all Grand Elected Knights **R., P., S.**; Most Wise Sovereigns; Excellent and Perfect Princes Rose Croix; Grand, Ineffable, Sublime, and Adopted Masons of every Degree of Ancient and Modern Masonry throughout the Universe.

To all to whom These Presents may Come,

LIGHT, LIFE, LOVE.

Know ye, That We, the undersigned Sovereign Grand Inspectors General, do hereby certify, acknowledge, and proclaim our Excellent Brother, C. von Engel C. Thabertus Mills Wilde,

to be an Expert Master of the Symbolic Lodges; Secret Master; Perfect Master; Intimate Secretary; Provost and Judge; Intendant of the Buildings; Elected Knight of Nine; Elected of Fifteen; Sublime Knight Elected; Grand Master Architect; Ancient Master of the Royal Arch; a Grand Elect Perfect and Sublime Mason;

We do also Certify, That at the Caput University Chapter Rose Croix of H.R.D.M. held at Esperdo, on Monday the 27th day of November, 1876 the said Brother C. von Engel C. Thabertus Mills Wilde having been duly installed Knight of the Sword or of the East, Prince of Jerusalem, and Knight of the East and West; was received, admitted, and constituted, an **EXCELLENT AND PERFECT PRINCE ROSE CROIX OF H.R.D.M.**

In Testimony whereof, We, the undersigned Sovereign Grand Inspectors General, of the Supreme Council of the 33rd Degree for England and Wales and the Dependencies of the British Crown, have hereunto subscribed our names, and have affixed our Seals in our Grand Council Chamber, this Fourth day of the month called March A.H. 5637, A.L. 5550, and the twentieth day of the month of December A.D. 1876.

† A. Leck 33rd
R. ⚔ of H.R.D.M., K.H., S.P.R.S.
Grand Treasurer Gen. H.E.

† Lamaun 33rd
R. ⚔ of H.R.D.M., K.H., S. of S.P.R.S.
Soc. Grand Commander H.E.

† W. H. Phillips 33rd
R. ⚔ of H.R.D.M., K.H., S.P.R.S.
Grand Secretary Gen. H.E.



Registered in the Archives of the Supreme Council 33rd.

† W. H. Phillips
R. ⚔ of H.R.D.M., K.H., S.P.R.S.
Assistant-Secretary, S.G.C.

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out. I cannot make it out.' Can you imagine that he could not understand? He was much perplexed. He said: 'But I have already given him a fortnight. . . .' Then he added: 'Well, if that's the way you have settled it, I shall give both of you a fortnight.' Was it not extraordinary? The man had no imagination of any kind."

Gide remarked that Wilde was greatly amused with what he was saying; he laughed, he was happy to be telling this story. He concluded the story by saying: "And naturally, after the fortnight, we had a greater wish than ever to talk to each other. You cannot think how sweet it was to feel that we were suffering one for the other. As time went on, as we did not always have the same places in the ranks—as time went on, I was able to converse with every one of the other prisoners—with every one, with every one."

The recollection, however, of the fortnight spent in the cells had made him very prudent, and besides this he had no wish to appear ungrateful in the eyes of the new Governor, Major Nelson. The Governor who "was altogether terrible" was an official named Isaacson, the very man for a *garde-chiourme*, who seems to have won rapid promotion in a service where,

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in those days, at least, humaneness was not encouraged by the "system." Major Nelson, who was in charge of Reading Gaol during the last few months of Oscar Wilde's detention there, seems better than his predecessor to have known how to reconcile with a strict execution of his irksome duties that mansuetude which should be looked for in Christian gentlemen, even when they are prison governors. I am giving in facsimile in these pages a letter addressed to Robert Ross, by Mr Isaacson. This person, it will be seen, answers Ross's application on the turned-back corner of his own letter.

Well, Wilde was very anxious not to do anything to lose the Governor's good opinion of him, and so he was much upset when he saw the remand prisoner making signals to him.

"I took no notice at first and turned my eyes away," he continued; "but when he had again attracted my attention, he made that Masonic sign to me which is known as 'the sign of the widow's son,' which is an appeal from one brother Mason to another, when in direct distress, which cannot be disregarded under any circumstances, and must be responded to.

[How true this is was shown in the Old Bailey a year or two ago, when a prisoner in the dock made "the sign of the widow's son" to the judge

11, UPPER PHILLIMORE GARDENS,
KENSINGTON, LONDON, W.

May 18th / 1906

Dear Sir

Will you kindly place my name
on the list of those who may have
applied to see Mr Oscar Wilde when
he is next allowed to receive visitors

faithfully yours

Robert B. Ross

The Governor

H. M. Prison

Reading

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on the bench, and the judge laid down the black cap and made the countersign, with the tears bursting from his eyes. The prisoner was the

*prisoner, Oscar Wilde desires
that Mr. Shepard and
yourself will visit him
at your convenience -*

N. V. Enclosed -

*Both visitors must
make their visit
together.*

*C. P.
— C. S.*

205-96

Answer from le nommé Isaacson to Mr Robert Ross's application, written, as may be observed, on the turned-down corner of Mr Ross's letter

man Seddon, an insurance agent, who had murdered an old lady who was boarding in his house, after plundering her of a not inconsiderable competency, and the judge was Mr Justice Bucknill.]

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“ So I was obliged to respond to the man, and very fortunately escaped attracting the attention of the warders, but I was determined not to run the risk again, especially as it was quite out of my power to help my brother Mason.”

“ And how did you manage that, Oscar ? ” he was asked.

“ Oh, I asked to see the Governor after I had got back to my cell, and I told him how I was placed, between my desire not to break the prison regulations and my pledged duty to my order. I did not, of course, indicate in any way who was the man who had signalled to me. And a ruse was decided upon. If my eyes were bad and I couldn't see well, I could not be expected to respond to Masonic signals. So next time I went out to exercise I had been fitted by the prison doctor with a pair of dark blue goggles, and after that the man left me alone.”

I may say here that, although I visited Wilde several times in prison, both at Wandsworth and in Reading, and have much information about his life as a prisoner, I know nothing of it from his lips. He never spoke to me on the subject, and I never questioned him. On the only occasion on which I made any reference to his prison life, and may have seemed to want some

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information, all he said was : “ Now, Robert, don’t be morbid.”

With regard to all those extraordinary companions of his, and the strange doings as to whom and as to which the trials brought out such revelations, I never heard him say a word about them. The only thing that might have “ given me to think ” that my friend was compromising himself with very undesirable people and was acting with incomprehensible folly was that he was fond of telling the story of how he had foiled the blackmailers when they came to “ rent ” him over that letter of his to Lord Alfred Douglas. I heard this story more than once. He delighted in telling it, and he told it in picturesque utterance. The dramatic side of these squalid interviews appealed to me, and the personality of the reptilian youths, with their panther-like glide as they emerged from the murk of Tite Street into the brilliance of his hall. He really seemed impressed by them. This passage in *De Profundis* will be remembered :

“ Clibborn and Atkins ” (these were the two blackmailers) “ were wonderful in their infamous war against life. To entertain them was an astounding adventure ; Dumas *père*, Cellini, Goya, Edgar Allan Poe or Baudelaire would have done just the same.”

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It is quite comprehensible that he should have been silent about these people and these topics in my company, before the exposures at the trials, because he knew that I had neither interest in nor any kind of sympathy with people and doings of that sort, indeed that the only feeling they aroused in me was a wish to laugh, with the kind of cruel laugh that greets the gyrations of a drunkard or the grotesque obscenities of a monkey-house. But when all the charges were out and registered against him, I might have expected him to say something to explain them, to disculpate himself, to cast some of his intolerable burthen on to the shoulders of others. But he only once referred to the past in my presence ; and the only words he said then were these : “ Fortune had so turned my head that I fancied I could do whatever I chose.” Then once again, while the last trial was in progress, he said to me one evening in Oakley Street, when he returned home on bail : “ I saw all those witnesses outside the Court to-day, Robert, and they jeered at me, they jeered at me. And I had always tried to be kind to them, nothing else, only tried to be kind to them.”

I never heard a single name mentioned nor any reference made to any place or incident.

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I did not know that such a person as Alfred Taylor existed, and I had never heard of any such street as College Street, Westminster. These names, as well as all the others, were learned by me for the first time when I saw them in the papers at the time of the trial. I had never heard any suspicions expressed as to Wilde's morality and normality, any more than the usual slanders which are current in England about everybody who is in any prominent position. The usual slander in England about a man is that he drinks, that he is a drunkard; and the next thing is that he is addicted to horrible sins, to unnatural vices. It was commonly reported, for instance, that when Wilde was arrested there were found on him, besides a quantity of other papers, writs and so forth, several letters from a distinguished "Conservative statesman who is also a great student of the classics." I was at pains to inquire into this report, and found that there was not a word of truth in it. The thing suggested, of course, was that the Right Honourable gentleman referred to was associated with Wilde in the pursuits alleged against the latter. I actually saw the docket or list of papers and articles taken from Wilde's pockets at Bow Street Police Station. I remember being

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surprised that several writs should have been found upon him, because at the time of his arrest he had three plays running in London, while his account at the St James's Square branch of his bank was good enough to allow him to draw one hundred pounds a few hours before his arrest.

CHAPTER X

Oscar Wilde's Improvidence—Bishop Berkeley's Medal—He preserves it all his Life—Wilde's Absolute Discreetness—Did Wilde bear another's Burden?—A Prison Admission—A Friend's Refusal to believe It—"Elle et Lui"—Oscar's One Amourette—Fatality again—The Pother about *De Profundis*—Socrates and Xantippe—Oscar Wilde as a Boy.

BUT Oscar Wilde was ever improvident and reckless about money, as so many of his countrymen are. Reference has been made to his having won, at the age of seventeen, for an essay on the Greek Comic Poets, the Berkeley Gold Medal. It would be interesting to know how many times during his lifetime this gold medal was pawned. I remember that it was in pawn when I was staying with Oscar Wilde at his rooms in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square, because one day, when he found he had lost the pawn-ticket relating to this pledge, he asked me to accompany him to Marlborough Police Court to make the necessary affidavit entitling him to a fresh ticket. He must have greatly prized the actual medal, because it was one of the few things of his past possessions which he preserved to the day of his death. Though often desperately

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poor after his release from prison, he seems always to have managed to pay the interest on the Bishop's medal, and after his death Robert Ross found the ticket for it amongst his papers. I had always understood that the medal was, though to win it was a high distinction, intrinsically of small value. I was told in Dublin what was the amount the Bishop had left for supplying the medal, and it seemed so small to me, that I wrote in my *Life* :

“ In a letter written by Lady Wilde to Mr O'Donoghue she begs him not to omit to mention, in writing a biographical notice of her, that both her sons were Gold Medallists, ‘ a distinction,’ she said, ‘ of which they are both very proud.’ Oscar's medal was the Berkeley Medal. This prize was founded by the famous Bishop Berkeley, who denied the existence of matter, and of whom Lord Byron wrote that when he said that there was no matter, it really was no matter what he said. It was possibly from a desire to be consistent with his principles that the Bishop left so small a sum for the purpose of this prize that the Berkeley Gold Medal is not materially of much value.”

Well, when I asked Ross why, as he had found the ticket, he had not redeemed the medal which

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had been so much prized by Oscar Wilde, and would consequently have been something that his family would have wished to preserve, he said: "It was at the time quite impossible. Why, there was sixty pounds worth of gold alone in it!" I am glad of the opportunity of making this correction "here and now," and can only suppose that Bishop Berkeley's legacy developed amazingly by unearned increment.

Another story which was persistent at the time of Oscar Wilde's arrest was that a certain very well known nobleman was in such terror as to the consequences which any revelations on Wilde's part might bring upon him that he took refuge on board his yacht, and remained there, ready at any moment, on a signal from land, to up anchor and steam away out of British jurisdiction, until Wilde had been tried for the last time, and had been sent to prison.

From Wilde himself I never heard anything either before, pending or after his trials about the wretched business in which he was implicated, or the wretched people who seemed to have been associated with him. He was absolutely discreet and reticent, and not to me alone. As to this, may I quote what many years ago I wrote on the subject. I am referring to the period

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when he was out on bail and I was seeing him every day at Oakley Street.

“Yet my admiration for the nobility of character which he displayed helped me to bear the tragedy, long drawn out, of those cruel days. Not one word of recrimination ever passed his lips. He attached blame to no one. He sought to involve no one. He had no thought of vengeance, or even of resentment, against those who had encompassed his so formidable ruin. He bent his broad shoulders, and essayed with his sole strength to bear the crushing burden of infamy and fate. He never showed himself to me more fine than in the days when the whole world was shouting out that he was of men the vilest.”

The people who had been associated with him in his strange frequentations seemed to have feared he would speak—seemed to have feared his revelations. A scampering exodus took place from London. A wave of terror swept over the Channel and the city of Calais witnessed a strange invasion. From the arcana of London a thousand guilty consciences, startled into action by the threat of imminent requitals, came fleeing south. Every outgoing steamer

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numbered amongst its passengers such nightmare faces as in quiet times one cannot fancy to exist outside the regions of disordered dreams. My loyalty in friendship lent to misinterpretation. I saw those nightmare faces (I was in Paris at the time) gathering around me, watching with pale eyes for sympathy, where I had nothing but revolt and horror to give.

Lord Alfred Douglas, of whom I will say that he did not desert his friend when the crash came, until Wilde himself requested him to leave the country, girds against me in his book for pointing out that had Wilde chosen to speak he could have disculpated himself almost entirely by implicating others. In my book from which Lord Alfred quotes, but which, as he says, he has done me the honour not to read, occurs this passage :

“ There had been six counts against him. He was asked after his release by a very old friend as to the justice of the finding and he said : ‘ Five of the counts referred to matters with which I had absolutely nothing to do. There was some foundation for one of the counts.’ ‘ But then why,’ asked his friend, ‘ did you not instruct your defenders ? ’ ‘ That would have meant betraying a friend,’ said Oscar Wilde.”

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Alfred Douglas indignantly espouses the cause of the unknown and unnamed friend, and declares, what we have seen to be false, that Wilde was not made of the stuff which sacrifices itself for a friend, and that, far from going to disgrace and prison for a friend, he would not even have gone without his dinner !

The same statement as to his paying the penalty for another man's sins is made by Wilde in that long letter which he wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas from Reading Gaol and extracts from which have been published under the title, *De Profundis*, a book which has made some stir in the world. The passage is as follows :—

“ A great friend of mine—a friend of ten years' standing—came to see me some time ago, and told me that he did not believe a single word of what was said against me, and wished me to know that he considered me quite innocent, and the victim of a hideous plot. I burst into tears at what he said, and told him that while there was much amongst the definite charges that was quite untrue and transferred to me by revolting malice, still my life had been full of perverse pleasures, and that unless he accepted that as a fact about me, and realised it to the

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full, I could not possibly be friends with him any more, or ever be in his company.”

I know the friend he is referring to, a man of very considerable wealth and high culture, an Oxford man, by the way, with houses in Paris and in England, married to a beautiful woman, with a family of children, the very sort of man who, if he had ever had the faintest suspicion that there was anything wrong in Wilde's life and conduct, or if Wilde had ever hinted at the frequentations which were charged against him, would have put an immediate period to their friendship. But, as I know, he entirely believed what Wilde told him in prison, disregarded his penitential self-accusation as to perverse pleasures, remained his constant friend and admirer until his death, and has respected his memory ever since. He was one of the first people to write to me after I had published my *Story of an Unhappy Friendship* to thank me for having written it. I saw him afterwards in Paris, and he said that never at any time had he had any suspicion as to Wilde's morality. “Otherwise,” he said, “do you think I would have had him to my house to meet my wife and children?” I told him that I was exactly in the same position, and that, not only had I never

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seen or heard anything about Wilde to make me think him abnormal, but that also he seemed immune against those natural temptations which beset healthy young men. "The only time," I said, "that I ever saw him talking to a woman under a sexual impulse was once at the Eden Palace in Paris, a sort of music-hall, which *cocottes* used to frequent. I left him talking to her, and I can't say whether he succumbed to her allurements or not, but next day when I called on him at the Hôtel Voltaire, the first thing he said to me was : ' Robert, what animals we are.' I remember the incident, trivial as it is, because a tragic end was the close of that woman's career. She was the Marie Aguétant who was murdered in her flat by the sinister and mysterious assassin and thief who passed under the name of Prado. But Wilde was a young man then, and it was long before his marriage."

In parentheses : it is a curious coincidence that the charming young lady who was married, in January 1914, to Oscar's younger son, Vyvyan, is the niece of a Parisian *grande dame*, who indirectly was the cause of Prado's final arrest. She was driving home one winter's evening to her beautiful house on the Cours-la-Reine, and was just passing a hotel, which

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stands next to the house where Prince Roland Bonaparte used to live, when a small, dark man dashed out in full flight, pursued by a waiter, who was shouting : “ *Au voleur ! Au voleur ! Arrêtez-le ! Arrêtez-le.*” The Countess’s carriage just drove by as the man was bolting across the road ; he was nearly run over, and delayed long enough to enable two *sergents-de-ville* to run up. “ I saw him dash across the road behind my carriage,” said the Countess, with whom I dined that evening, “ and disappear down the steps leading to the quay, closely followed by the two police officers. Then, just as we were turning into my courtyard, I heard the sound of revolver shots.” This was Prado, who was afterwards guillotined for the murder of Marie Aguétant, plus the attempted murder of the policeman.

The friend alluded to above was of my opinion that any foolish thing that Oscar Wilde had ever done had been done when he was not himself, when he had got several stages beyond mere “ ballooning.” “ He told me in prison,” he said, “ what you say he told you also, that he was strongly under the influence of prolonged drinking when he laid that information against Lord Queensberry.”

As to this, Lord Alfred Douglas denies that

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Wilde⁷ was intoxicated at the time. Very probably not. It is not so much when a man is intoxicated that he does foolish and wicked things, it is when his brain is muddled, and his inside all wrong through a long bout. Just in the same way it is very rare indeed for a man to be seized with delirium tremens when he is actually drunk. It is after he has apparently recovered his senses that the blow falls.

Wilde always told me he was irresponsible, and no master of himself, when he committed what he has described in *De Profundis* as “the one disgraceful, unpardonable, and to all time contemptible action of my life”—namely, informing against Lord Queensberry—as to which action he further says, in the same letter: “What seemed to the world and to myself my future, I lost when I allowed myself to be taunted into taking action against Lord Queensberry.”

With regard to *De Profundis*, I would like to say here that until Dr Meyerfeld first published, in Germany, the extracts from Wilde’s prison letter to Alfred Douglas which go under this name, I did not know of the existence of such a manuscript. Wilde never mentioned its entity, nor had Ross ever told me anything about it. Nor did I know then, or even when that infamous book, *The First Stone*, came out, that the

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letter had been addressed to Alfred Douglas, or that it contained any recriminations against him. I only knew that there were other parts, and that Doctor Meyerfeld, with the publicist's *flair* for what is likely to win notoriety and consequently likely to sell, was most anxious to publish the whole thing in Germany—where, by the way, *De Profundis* first saw the light. Meyerfeld was most desirous to do this, and tried to enlist my co-operation to overcome Ross's invincible objection. It was not till the Ransome trial that I had an opportunity of seeing a typewritten copy of the whole MS., as it was penned in Reading Gaol, and I admit that I then felt that Ross had acted with great discretion and excellent good sense in refusing to make Wilde's recriminations against his former friend public. And this in spite of the fact that there were certain passages, or at least a certain passage, in the suppressed portion, concerning myself, which for my own sake as well as that of my friends, I should have been pleased to see in print, explaining, as the words did, the nature of my friendship with Oscar Wilde, and further demolishing the evil construction which was put upon it by enemies. I also saw how wisely, merely from a business point of view, Ross had acted in suppressing all the matter addressed to

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Lord Alfred Douglas. I don't believe that if the whole manuscript, as it stood, had been published it would have gained a tithe of the universal appreciation which it now enjoys. Its beauties would have been swamped in the unloveliness of the peevish recriminations it contains, which are of no interest to anybody. It occurred to me that the original *De Profundis* might be said to resemble a work written in collaboration by Socrates and his good lady. Ross very wisely has given us the Socratean parts alone, leaving the Xantippe contributions for a remote posterity to deal with. How posterity (a generation and a half hence !) will deal with them, who can have a shadow of a doubt ? It will leave this bi-chromatic manuscript to the repose and silence of the strong room in the British Museum. Who in 1960 will care whether Oscar Wilde sent grapes to a certain Lord Alfred Douglas, or whether the latter did or did not reciprocate the attention ? It is too childish even to be considered. In forty-six years from now, the world won't be troubling about how a poet squabbled in the last century with the second son of an eighth marquess ; it will have other tremendous problems to face.

I think I may cite Wilde's absolute silence to me on the subject of *De Profundis*, undoubtedly

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because of its personal and philippic character, as another instance of his unfeminine character.

We have now seen the "effeminate" Oscar Wilde, with "the feminine soul," as a man of great physical and moral courage, as a complete master of his tongue, as a man with whom a secret was eternally safe. We can now return to him where we left him, dressed as a girl, in his father's house in Merrion Square, Dublin. He rarely spoke of his childhood, beyond saying that he had been very, very happy. His parents seem to have considered him a prodigy. When he was only nine years old, his mother described him as "wonderful, wonderful." Lady Wilde seems to have made a constant companion of her second son. He accompanied her and his father on their journeys of archæological research; he was on the Continent with his mother long before he was out of knickerbockers. There seems to have been little of the nursery in Oscar Wilde's life. The boys used to dine with their parents, even when there was company in the house in Merrion Square. Before Oscar was eight years old, he had, as a biographer of his writes, "learnt the ways to the shores of old romance, had seen all the apples plucked from the tree of knowledge, and had gazed with wondering eyes into the younger day."



OSCAR WILDE AS A CHILD.

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As a lad he was very fond of his brother Willie. When I first met him in Paris he spoke of him with great affection and admiration. He told me of their games together, and how once when playing "chargers" in the nursery, with Willie and the boy who is now Sir Edward Sullivan, Bart., he got his arm broken. "It was my first introduction to the horrors of pain, the lurking tragedies of life." He went on to say the detestation he had of physical pain, "a thousand times worse than any mental suffering," and could only attribute the heroism of martyrs to a kind of hysterical insanity. At the same time he declared that he had no sympathy with people suffering from physical pain. "Illness and suffering always inspire me with repulsion. A man with the toothache ought, I know, to have my sympathy, for it is a terrible pain. Well, he fills me with nothing but aversion. He is tedious. He is a bore. I cannot stand him. I cannot look at him. I must get away from him." That was in 1883. Twelve years later he found the path of pity and compassion as he describes in *De Profundis*, and as he proves in his two letters to *The Daily Chronicle*—"The Case of Warder Martin" and "Prison Reform."

I think that he was always deeply attached to his brother—the fact is, Oscar Wilde had a

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truly affectionate heart—and it was to him he fled for refuge on the night of his release on bail,

THE DAILY CH

THE CASE OF WARDER MARTIN.

SOME CRUELITIES OF PRISON LIFE.

THE EDITOR OF THE DAILY CHRONICLE.

SIR.—I learn with great regret, through the columns of your paper, that the warder Martin, of Reading Prison, has been dismissed by the Prison Commissioners for having given some sweet biscuits to a little hungry child. I saw the three children myself on the Monday preceding my release. They had just been convicted, and were standing in a row in the central hall in their prison dress, carrying their sheets under the arms previous to their being sent to the cells allotted to them. I happened to be passing along one of the galleries on my way to the reception room, where I was to have an interview with a friend. They were quite small children, the youngest—the one to whom the warder gave the biscuits—being a tiny little chap, for whom they had evidently been unable to find clothes small enough to fit. I had, of course, seen many children in prison during the two years during which I was myself confined. Wandsworth Prison, especially, contained

Facsimile of beginning of Letter to *Daily Chronicle* on
Warder Martin

when he had been hunted out of house after house by Lord Queensberry's myrmidons. I remember them as very good friends together



BROTHER WILLIE.—“NEVER MIND, OSCAR; OTHER GREAT MEN
HAVE HAD THEIR DRAMATIC FAILURES!”

VERA: OR, THE NIHILISTS.

Cartoon (9½ by 6½ in.) by Alfred Bryan showing William Wilde comforting his brother Oscar after the failure of "Vera" in America.

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in the Charles Street days. I have heard Oscar giving Willie many a plot for a tale for *The World* and the other papers to which he contributed. He was vastly proud of Willie's big success as reporter to *The Daily Telegraph* at the Parnell inquiry. Such estrangement as did exist later, and for a short period, between the brothers, was caused by the fact that Willie's Bohemianisms might injure his (Oscar's) social progress. He was rather unkind to his brother about this time; spoke of him as "seeking after the usual half-crown" and referred contemptuously to his brother's "gutter friends."

CHAPTER XI

An Unfortunate Characteristic—Willie Wilde's Insouciance—The Family Honour—Oscar's Gratitude—Harboured Grievances—The Mummer and his Gloves—Brookfield as Private Detective—Oscar Wilde at School—An Unboyish Boy—Oscar Wilde and Verlaine—And the Acrobat—His Reserve and his Ostentation—Irish Reluctance to speak about Oscar Wilde.

THIS habit of saying mordant things about people was one of Wilde's most unfortunate characteristics. I fancy that even Willie, proud as he was of his brother and truly affectionate as he was by nature, was not without some feeling of resentment against him for the unkind things that Oscar had said to and about him, a resentment which may possibly have diminished for him at least the appalling grief that all Oscar Wilde's friends felt at his terrible downfall. I remember that during those dreadful days at Oakley Street, when Oscar Wilde was out on bail at his brother's house, Willie did not seem to realise the terrible danger in which his brother stood. It is quite possible that he never anticipated his conviction. At any rate, he violently opposed any suggestion that Oscar should take to his heels, as more than one of his

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friends was urging him to do. He was particularly anxious lest my influence with Oscar might bring him to flee, for I had very definitely stated that I considered that that was, in view of the wild prejudice that existed against the accused man, the only sensible thing to do. "Oscar is an Irish gentleman," he used to say to me, "and will stay and face the music." One morning he came down to breakfast and made the announcement that he had decided that I must be induced to return to Paris. "And," he added, "if he hasn't the means to travel, I must sell my library to get him his ticket." In this attitude I saw that he preferred, to his brother's safety, the family honour. I am not blaming him for that, but would have welcomed a little more solicitude for Oscar and a little less of the Spartan lack of altruism. His singularly high spirits during the whole of that mournful period struck me as peculiar. He was joking and laughing all the time. He greatly enjoyed the mixture of metaphors into which he had fallen when, first describing poor Oscar's arrival at Oakley Street, on the night of his release from prison, after he had been hounded from one hotel to another, by Lord Queensberry's gang, he had informed me that "Oscar came tapping with his beak at my window and fell down on

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my threshold like a wounded stag." He repeated it frequently, to Oscar's intense *énervement*. He did not seem to care to spare his brother's feelings. He was constantly referring to some letters which he had found addressed to Oscar by one of his friends from Italy, in which a curious medley of attractions was set out. There was moonlight on the orange-groves and there were other inducements which need not be particularised. It is, I have always held, very unfortunate that those letters were not preserved. They would have established that the alleged corrupter was a man who had refused to be corrupted. I can remember also how, one day at lunch, he made Oscar wince, as though with a branding-iron, by relating how he had had a discussion that morning with a cabman and had challenged him to fight "on *Queensberry* rules." I thought it a fine thing in my friend that he showed no resentment whatever at these examples of tactlessness; he seemed profoundly grateful to his brother for his hospitality and protection, and, in his heart of hearts, I do not doubt that he was glad to have Willie between him and friends like myself, who wanted him to yield to his accusers, to seek safety in flight, and, in the eyes of his enemies, forfeit his honour. On more than one occasion

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at Oakley Street he said things that showed that he felt sorry to have hurt unwittingly his brother's feelings in the past. I as often told him that I did not think that he had ever wilfully hurt anybody's feelings, but that he was so fond of epigram and so skilled in language, repartee and retort that, if a smart thing was to be said, say it he would, no matter how it might sting the person it was aimed at. How many people had harboured grievances against him for having been made victims of his fondness for smart sayings was shown by the extraordinary number of enemies who emerged from the obscurity of their lives when he fell. Men seem to be able to forgive everything except injuries to their vanity. Hell knows no fury here also. One of Oscar's most mischievous enemies in active aggressiveness was an actor whom he had criticised for appearing in a New York drawing-room wearing his gloves during an afternoon call. Another actor, Charles Brookfield, who in January 1895 had thankfully accepted a part in Oscar Wilde's play, *An Ideal Husband*, was, as Mr Stuart Mason informs us, "largely responsible for collecting the evidence which brought about Wilde's downfall some weeks later." Stuart Mason adds: "After Wilde's conviction, Brookfield and some friends enter-

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tained the Marquess of Queensberry at a banquet in celebration of the event. In revenge for this, some of Wilde's admirers entered a protest at the Prince of Wales's Theatre on the night of Charles Hawtrey's revival of Charles Brookfield's play, *Dear Old Charlie*, on 20th February 1912, shortly after the latter's appointment as joint-reader of plays." Brookfield's incentive may have been a real friendship for Lord Queensberry, but there was *Brodneid* in it also, and doubtless resentment for one or two remarks which Oscar Wilde had made about his representation of himself in *The Poet and the Puppets*.

Oscar had had this unfortunate habit of *médiance* all his life. It is the characteristic of his which his schoolfellows at Portora first recall. He was the inventor of nicknames for the school—none flattering. At Portora also he displayed that aloofness which distinguished him in after life and which raised up so many enemies to him. The "ordinary individual," the elderly individual, the ugly, those suffering from physical illness or disfigurement were very soon made to feel that Oscar Wilde did not desire their acquaintance or their company. On several occasions I have seen him act towards such in a manner that might, in a person of less importance, have been considered as downright



PAUL VERLAINE.
Perhaps the greatest poet that ever lived. He met Wilde.



HENRI DE RÉGNIER.
A distinguished French writer and Academician, author of a remarkable article on Oscar Wilde.

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discourtesy and rudeness. "I can't help it," he used to say; "I can't stand those sort of people." "How can you know such a dreadfully ugly man?" he once asked me, after he had cold-shouldered a friend of mine, whom I had introduced to him at Charles Street. He would certainly have been rude to Socrates, and indeed after spending some time in the company of a poet who was the physical re-incarnation of Socrates—I mean Paul Verlaine—combined with the habits and *laissez-aller* of Diogenes, he complained bitterly of the discomfort he had felt at having to sit at the same café-table with a person so unattractive. And this was the great Verlaine, sweetest of poets, most winsome of those men-children who have never grown up. He was perfectly truthful in his answers to Mr Carson about the kind of people he liked and disliked. After his hour in Verlaine's company at the Café François Premier, we were walking down the Boulevard St Michel, when we were accosted by a young acrobat, an exceedingly graceful and handsome young fellow. He was carrying a red carpet, and he asked us to patronise him, for, he said, "*Je travaille très bien.*" "I like that," said Wilde; "I like his 'I do fine things.' That is what every artist ought to say about himself. This lad quite takes

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the taste of Verlaine, with his hideous squalor and his bagnio humility and self-derogation, out of my mouth. I will patronise this lad." So he sat down on the *terrasse* of a café on the Place St Michel and bade the acrobat perform, bestowed largess on him, and afterwards made him sit at our table, where he let him order what he liked, and carried on an animated conversation with him for a very much longer time than I thought necessary or wise. And this in spite of the fact that the spectacle of this elegantly dressed and remarkable-looking man sitting in front of a café at the same table with a tumbler in spangled trunks attracted the attention of all the passers-by. He did not seem to mind being noticed under such circumstances, any more than later on he had no hesitation in showing himself at public places of entertainment with the extraordinary companions who afterwards testified against him. Yet on the previous evening he had precipitately fled from a box at the "Skating" Music Hall, because he noticed that none of the other boxes were occupied and that he was attracting attention on this account. I referred to this after we had left the acrobat and were walking home, and he said that he had hated to be stared at when sitting in the box, because there curiosity was aroused in him on

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1/2 Miss Foxwell
12 Holborn House
S W.

Sept. 21, 1895.

My dear Mr Sherard,

It was indeed awful
more so than I had any con-
-ception it could be I could
not see him I could not
touch him; and I scarcely
spoke to him and see me
before you go to him on Monday
at anytime after I can
see you when I go again
I am to get at the Home
Secretary thro' Mr Staldans
and try and get a ~~pass~~
room to see him in and
touch him again. He has
been mad, ^{the last 3 ~~days~~} and he says that

if he saw ^{- the world}
kill him so he had better
keep away and be satisfied
with having married a fine
life. Few people can boast of
so much.

I thank you for your kindness
to a fallen friend; you are kind
a gentle to him and you are,
I think the only person he can
hear to see

Yours most truly,
Constance Wilde

Facsimile of a Letter from Constance Wilde to the Author, after visiting Oscar Wilde in Prison, in which she declares that he had been mad for the three years previous. Incidentally the Letter may serve to refute certain allegations as to the nature of the friendship between the Author and Oscar Wilde

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account of his supposed wealth (being the only occupant of the high-priced *loges*), but that he did not at all mind being noticed because he was in the company of a social outcast ; was rather proud of it, in fact. While he often went out of his way to illustrate his theories and to force them on public attention, he avoided anything resembling ostentation. For his Lucullian repasts at a restaurant, he preferred a private room. He did not want to be noticed as a man who could spend money freely. But he did not mind sitting with an acrobat at the *apéritif* in the view of all Paris. So also when he went with ordinary people to a theatre, he would prefer to sit at the back of the box, but when he was in company of curious folk he liked everybody in the theatre to notice it. Towards the end of his career in London, I heard some extraordinary accounts of public appearances he had made in the London places of entertainment.

It has often occurred to me, in thinking over those times, that Constance Wilde was quite justified in telling me that her husband, at the time of his arrest, had for some years previously been out of his mind. Certainly just before his arrest he was acting in a manner entirely alien to the Oscar Wilde whom I had known for so many years. The laying of an information



CONSTANCE WILDE.

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against Lord Queensberry, and all the noise and display that surrounded that miserable act, were sure signs that the man was not himself. I remember the dismay with which I read that Oscar Wilde, in his rôle of prosecutor, had driven up to the Bow Street Police Court, to give evidence against the Marquess, in a carriage and pair, a *voiture de grande remise* which was to figure subsequently on more than one occasion, as in the precipitate withdrawal from the Old Bailey, and the drive to the Cadogan Hotel, from which he was to return in a four-wheeled cab, between two detective-inspectors, and that much-advertised excursion in "Bosie's" company to Monte Carlo before the Queensberry trial, when effacement and discreetness seemed indispensable. But the man seemed altogether transformed and spoiled. One heard of his engaging an "under-butler" and wondered why no groom of the chambers. In which connection it is curious to note that Oscar Wilde never employed a valet, even in his days of opulence. One would have fancied a valet likely to be of far more service to him than an under-butler, or even than a butler pure and simple, especially as he rarely dined at home, and certainly never owned a cellar. But I never knew him to have a man to attend to him, and it now occurs to me that

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I never asked him why he dispensed with a servant so essential to a man of fashion, who likes to turn out faultlessly groomed. Amongst the fellows who were brought to give evidence against him there were two gentleman's servants, and it seems to me that if he had desired their company for the purposes alleged, his evil designs might have been very much more easily effected, without risk of detection or even comment, by engaging one or the other of them to act as his valet. That is, doubtless, what, had his intentions in seeking their company been such as were described by the prosecution, he would have done.

Oscar Wilde rarely if ever spoke to me of his schooldays. I understood that his reminiscences of school life were that it was essentially tedious and that, like most of us, he longed to grow up and be out in that world where, as a matter of fact, one first begins to realise what tediousness means. I never heard of his having any fights. I imagine that his bulk, to say nothing of his manner, secured him immunity from assault, in spite of the fact that his justifiable assumption of superiority, his distaste for games, and the fact that he insisted on always wearing a top-hat, must have marked him for the vengeance of the school bullies. I fancy that Willie may



OSCAR WILDE AS A LAD.



PORTORA ROYAL SCHOOL, IRELAND, WHERE OSCAR WILDE WAS EDUCATED.

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have stood between him and these. Willie was intensely proud and very fond of his bookish and clever brother, and Willie was very handy with his fists. It is recorded, by the way, that he was very "superior in his manner" towards Willie. His conduct was uniformly good, and only one occasion is remembered on which he violently misbehaved himself, by an open defiance of the headmaster, "Old Steele," whom, it appears, he "cheeked something awful." This must have been one of the very rare occasions in his life when he let temper get beyond control. I never once saw him in a temper during the seventeen years that I knew him. He did not particularly distinguish himself at school, but it was noticed that he could master the contents of a book with extraordinary rapidity and that what he had once read he never forgot. He does not seem to have attempted any writing as a boy, the kind of writings, I mean, that puerile pens indulge in, poetry and so forth, but his mother used to speak with delight of the beautiful letters which he sent her from Portora School, which, she said, were "wonderful and often real literature." One such letter at least is extant, and has been referred to in these pages. As a schoolboy, so he told me, he had no spirit of adventure, no

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wish to run away, to join the pirates, to hunt Red Indians, to form secret societies, to go to sea, to be wrecked on desert islands, or to do any of the things which most boys are so very anxious to do. He once told me that he had never climbed a tree, that he never collected anything, not even postage stamps, and had always regarded collecting things as the essence of tediousness. Besides which, he had no sense of ownership, no desire for property. He satisfied himself with reading of the adventures of others, and devoured the English classical novels. He was all along too bulky to be a boy of action. He "used to flop about ponderously" is what was said of him. No doubt he had at heart a very solid contempt for his schoolfellows (one can imagine the genus) and it may be noted that, apart from the two Wildes, none of the Portora boys of those days has ever distinguished himself. He seems to have liked to look nice, and better dressed than his associates, from whom he further differentiated himself by allowing his hair to grow long. I think the best friend of his schooldays was his mother, at home, to whom he wrote his wonderful letters. He would be thinking of her most of the time, and no doubt the fact that she took him on Continental travel in his holidays satisfied

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the *Wanderlust* that is innate in every boy, and kept him quiet and apparently apathetic in term-time. One does not hear much of his being greedy at school, as boys are, but the letter referred to shows that he appreciated a hamper from home. He took such a delight, in later life, in the pleasures of the table, and was a gourmet so pronounced, that the Wilde of Portora School might have shown some penchant that way, but I have not been able to get any proof of his having done so. When one has talked with former pupils of the school, with former masters and people about the place who may have been living there in the sixties—even those who are ready to speak about Oscar Wilde seem to remember very little about him. He was so reserved, and stood so much aloof, that he seems to have passed through the school without attracting any particular attention. Possibly some might be able to tell one things, but prefer not to speak about him. I have noticed in Ireland a great reluctance to speak about Oscar Wilde, and this is not from any condemnation of the man, of whom all Irishmen, I think, are proud, but from a want of confidence in the motives which prompt the questions. When I was writing my *Life of Wilde*, I found many people in Ireland who could have been most

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useful to me, but these refused to say a word about him, thinking that any Englishman could only write about Wilde to attack his memory. Indeed one New York editor, a certain Laffan, did actually, in a long editorial in *The New York Sun*, charge me with having committed a *mauvaise action* in writing the book at all. A certain Sullivan, M.P., one of them, who had been a great friend of the Wilde family, wrote me a most indignant letter when he heard that I was wishful of writing a Life of Wilde. He seemed convinced that I, as an Englishman, could have no other object than to condemn the brilliant Irishman of whom his countrymen were so proud. It was of no avail that I pointed out to him that, on the contrary, my object was to show that Oscar Wilde was not the monster that many English people wished him to be remembered as, and that I thought a useful and patriotic purpose would be served by showing foreigners that we do have men of genius in Great Britain who do not necessarily belong to the teratological domain, an impression which, with regard to our men of genius, we English have sedulously fostered abroad. But it was in vain. None of the people who knew Oscar Wilde as a lad and a schoolboy would consent to speak about him. "Let him rest in peace,"

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was their answer. In other words, let his friends remain silent while his innumerable enemies keep alive the horrible legend which they invented.

CHAPTER XII

Oscar Wilde at Oxford—An Effective Antithesis—Had Oxford Anything to give him?—A Portrait of Wilde—What it reveals—Why he attracted little Attention—Oscar Wilde as a Bibliophile—Oscar Wilde and a Rare Book—He approves of an Extraordinary Publication—The Bibliophily in *Dorian Gray*—An Etymological Error—Wilde, the Police and the Warders—Instinctive Anarchy—The *crassa Minerva* of the *Plebs*—A Ragging at Magdalen—Wilde's Affection for Oxford—Wilde's Gallant Sons.

IN *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde states that one of the two turning-points of his life was when his father sent him to Oxford. If that book had been published during his lifetime, I should have asked him to enlarge on this statement. My own opinion was that the phrase was written because it was an effective one, and facilitated an antithesis of which Victor Hugo would have been proud. Oscar Wilde has declared that when he wrote a book he was concerned entirely with literature—that is, with art. He rarely thought that anything that he wrote was true, indeed he might say, never—not true in the actual sense of the word. I think that this applies to much in *De Profundis*, this antithesis amongst other passages. I have known hundreds of Oxford men, and I never saw one on whom



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Oxford had left less of its unmistakable mark than Oscar Wilde. If I had had to guess at which university he had received his final education, I should have said Cambridge. Oxford bestows a certain manner, "the Oxford manner," not too agreeable, which was entirely absent from Wilde's demeanour. The average honours man is pedagogic, not to say pedantic, and was there ever a man of such universal knowledge as Oscar Wilde who less obtruded his superior sapience? Cambridge men are at least more modest, possibly because of the lower rank that their university holds in the public estimation. I don't see that Oxford gave him anything, had anything to give him. He went there, after sweeping all before him at Trinity, Dublin, as a business proposition. "He preferred to go to Oxford, where better things are to be won," is what is recorded, on College Green, of the reasons why he left Trinity. He had little to learn at Oxford, and he certainly did not read there much more than he read at Trinity. "He was not a reading man and was rarely seen at his books." The more I think of it, the more I wonder what he did mean in the statement I have quoted. It certainly was not Oxford that made a poet of him; his æstheticism must have developed there in spite

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of every antagonistic influence. In those days, at any rate, Oxford was the high metropolis of British Philistinism. It was the same university which had expelled Shelley and had bestowed high honours and plump prebends on Dr Warren. It has been a lethal chamber for the poets, with such few exceptions as, for instance, Matthew Arnold, William Wordsworth, junior, George Nathaniel Curzon, Sir Rennell Rodd and Ernest Dowson. It is true that *Ravenna*, the protoplasm of most of Wilde's verse, was written there, but it was conceived elsewhere, and the only credit that Oxford can claim from that fine poem is that it was probably evoked by the strong contrast between the mouldiness of its life and the damp mist of its meadows and the glorious, subsisting vitality of the sun-bathed Italian city, which Dante Alighieri elected for his eternal repose, one thousand years after the Empress Galla Placidia had been laid to rest there. Contrast is the active stimulus to literary production. Walter Raleigh describes the pulsing activity of the world's history in some Little Ease of the Tower of London; Bunyan, surrounded by thieves and outcasts in Bedford Gaol, evolves a saintly progress; Oscar Wilde writes *De Profundis* in Reading Gaol.

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We give in these pages a portrait of Oscar Wilde taken while he was an undergraduate, and it may fairly be asked if there is anything in the man's appearance, as shown in that picture, to warrant the stories that have been told of his posturing eccentricities there. Here is the typical undergraduate in the typical Oxford lounge suit, with nothing except his fine head to distinguish him from the other undergraduates in the group. I think that all the stories we have since heard about his conduct there and the unpopularity which it aroused have been invented for the needs of a very sorry cause. It is not denied that in his beautiful rooms in Magdalen he had some blue china, but it is improbable—indeed he denied it to me—that he ever said that he was trying to live up to it, and no doubt there were many other young men of taste who had such porcelain ornaments in their rooms.

I was up at Oxford not many years after Oscar Wilde had gone down. There was certainly no talk about him. He had left behind him no legend. I never heard his name mentioned one single time. As regards any evil rumour connected with his name, there was none. There was a good deal of talk—far too much to my liking—about what has since been described

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as the Greek movement, but other names than his were associated with it. And then we have Alfred Douglas's invaluable testimony as to the position which Oscar Wilde held in the estimation of the President of his college.

This silence seems to me all the more remarkable to-day, since *Ravenna* has taken its right place in undergraduate verse. This poem had been recited at the Sheldonian Theatre just two years before I went up, and as amongst the non-sporting friends whom I had at the university were several poets—John Barlas, amongst others—who were postulant Newdigate prizemen, one would have fancied that Wilde's name, at least as a poet, would have come up in our interminable discussions. But I never heard it mentioned, and indeed the first time that I did hear of him as a poet, or at all, was in a letter which I received in Naples from another Newdigate poet, who has since come to very high honours in the diplomatic service.

No, Wilde was not a centre of corruption at Magdalen or in Oxford. He seems to have passed through the university without attracting much attention to himself, except in the schools, and can have exercised no influence on his contemporaries. He was not well off, his father could not largely supplement his scholar-



OSCAR WILDE AS AN UNDERGRADUATE, APRIL 3, 1876.

(Photo by Hills & Saunders, Oxford.)



OSCAR WILDE (STANDING UP) AT OXFORD, WITH FELLOW-UNDER-GRADUATES, FEB. 1, 1878.

(Photo by Hills & Saunders, Oxford.)

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ship, and in Oxford, in those days at least, the amount of a man's income went a long way towards deciding his popularity. "What's he got?" would be asked in Magdalen as readily as in Mayfair, and Wilde had got very little. This kind of snobbishness was certainly noticeable at the time when I was at Oxford. I remember, for instance, that an offensive name used to be given to the young men who, having passed the Indian Civil Service examination, were sent to Oxford at the Government expense, and that simply because they were being financially assisted. I understand that some similar feeling exists towards the Rhodes scholars nowadays, and for the same unworthy reason.

Wilde seems to have gone through Oxford much as he went through Trinity—that is to say, without drawing any particular attention to himself or leading anybody to suppose that here was a man of genius.

In my *Life of Wilde* I record some remarks made to me by one of his contemporaries at the University of Dublin. "He left this college with the very highest character." As regards scholarship, he was considered "an average sort of man." As regards æsthetic tendencies, nothing was remembered of him except that he

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was always fond of fine editions of books. This taste he afterwards lost. He cared little about books when I knew him, and what money he had to spend, certainly did not go to the bookseller. I can only recall one occasion on which he bought a valuable first edition, and that was the copy of the *Life of Gerard de Nerval*, of which I have spoken, and which he bought to give to me. I remember giving him once a very rare copy of *The Maxims of the Duc de la Rochefoucauld*, a writer for whom, in those Charles Street days, he expressed some admiration. He never looked at the book and attached no value to it. Beyond the fact that I noticed that, as usual, a piece had been torn out of the back page (to be rolled into a pellet and put into his mouth) I might have fancied that it had never been in his hands at all. When I last saw it, it was lying open amongst a lot of rubbish at the bottom of a cupboard in the Charles Street sitting-room. When he was in America he gave his *imprimatur* to a most extraordinary specimen of publishing bad taste. This was a volume of poems, produced in England by a former friend of his, for which he had been asked to find an American publisher. The poems were very beautiful ones, but the American edition was the most hideous production that has ever left

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the printing-press. The poems were printed on transparent paper, with coloured sheets behind each page, and an extraordinary collection of blocks had been used to "decorate" the pages. Under a beautiful poem, in which occurred the words, about a swallow, that "she took the sunset on her wings and flew," there was the picture of a flat candlestick from a block borrowed from some ironmonger's catalogue.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* there are several pages of bibliophily which would seem to indicate a knowledge of the subject, but these pages degage an odour, if not of the lamp, at least of the British Museum. As a matter of fact for these pages, as for his descriptions of jewels, laces, garments and other collectanea which Dorian studied, Wilde availed himself of booksellers' and antiquarians' catalogues, in doing which he was merely following the example of Victor Hugo, who made a habit of collecting every trade circular that came his way, even accepting the leaflets offered to him in the streets, and systematically filing these for future reference and use, where it was necessary to display technical knowledge. In this way he also acquired a reputation for omniscience.

In one way, indeed, his life at Oxford may be said to have influenced his character: it raised

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to acuteness his interest in Greece and Italy, and sent him wandering there during his vacations. Here and there he seems to have steeped himself in the life of bygone days, and so was induced into that "chronological error" of which Henri de Régnier speaks, where he says: "Mr Wilde thought himself living in Italy at the time of the Renaissance or in Greece in the days of Socrates. He was punished for a chronological error, and severely."

It is recorded of him that he rode a good deal while at Oxford, but that he never hunted. With regard to hunting, for which there are splendid facilities at Oxford, it will be remembered with what contempt he speaks somewhere in his plays of the sport: "the unspeakable in chase of the uneatable." He never rode during the time I knew him, and never spoke of horses, except to insist on the fact that under no conditions would he be driven in a cab with a white horse, because he considered that most unlucky. I have often wondered what was the colour of the horse that took him, in the company of Inspector Richards and Sergeant Allen, from the Cadogan Hotel to Scotland Yard, on the day of his arrest, 5th April 1895. I did ask him later on, but he said that he had been "too much interested to notice." He seems to have

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spent his time during that drive chatting with the two detectives on all manner of topics, and left them the impression that he was a very amiable gentleman and "as clever as they make them." Wilde always got on well with the minor myrmidons of the law, and had a very high opinion of them. After he had bailed poor Barlas out at Westminster Police Court, after his revolver practice, "to show his contempt for the Houses of Parliament" on Westminster Bridge, he could not speak too highly of the way the policemen and the warders spoke to and acted towards the prisoners under their charge. "They show them nothing of the contempt which the honest man is supposed to feel for the criminal. The feeling is that most people are liable at one time or another to get into trouble and that these just happen to be in that position. And with the instinctive anarchy which lies at the bottom of the hearts of most men, I rather suspect some sympathy with the lawbreakers as against the administrators of the law." And if for the prison officials under whom he served his sentence he had little respect—it will be remembered how he speaks of chaplains and doctors in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*—he seems to have liked and to have been liked by the warders. I remember that whenever I went to

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see him, either at Wandsworth or at Reading, every warder I came into contact with seemed to take a special interest in me when they knew who it was I had come to visit, were courteous and amiable and made things as easy for me as possible. Possibly in some cases this may have been because Wilde was considered a show prisoner, a prisoner of mark, a criminal of universal reputation, but, generally speaking, there was a decided manifestation of sympathy towards him. I remember one warder at Wandsworth who refused a tip from me—for some special trouble he had taken on my behalf—with the words that he had done nothing to earn it and was very sorry that he could do nothing for my friend, who was “the finest gentleman we have ever had inside these walls.” This incident occurred very shortly after I had received a letter from one of his friends, who reproached me with not conveying messages from him to the prisoner. I had written to tell him that I considered it imprudent to mention his name in any conversations with Wilde, for such conversations, if not listened to by the prison authorities, were certainly heard by the warder in attendance, and that any reference to him might get round to the Home Office and further jeopardise Oscar’s

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position. He wrote back to say that "the warder was not everybody," that no doubt a sovereign from me would make matters all right, and that such had been his experience at Holloway.

There is further to be noted in this connection that the special offences which were charged against Wilde seem not to arouse, amongst the classes to which warders and policemen belong, the horror with which they are considered by the higher ranks of British society. Ever since, owing to the Wilde scandals and the subsequent litigation in which Lord Alfred Douglas has been involved, my attention has been, to my extreme distaste, drawn to these wretched matters, I have found amongst the people a tendency to discover a source of humour, Aristophanean if coarse, in these aberrations which their votaries endeavour to poetise. I have been in the Old Bailey and in the Law Courts when these subjects have been under discussion, and have always noticed, on the part of the *plebs*, neither disgust, nor dismay, nor indignation, but hilarity and amusement, mingled, perhaps, with contemptuous pity. And my own opinion is that the *crassa Minerva* of the people rightly inspires them in this matter. One feels very sorry for the folk—many of them very delightful persons

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—who suffer from these aberrations, but one cannot withhold a certain amount of contempt, because every man, who is not a proclaimed lunatic, ought to be able to control himself. But one's main impulse is to laugh, perhaps, as Beaumarchais said, so as not to be forced to weep.

Oscar Wilde left Oxford with the very highest character, just as he had left Portora and Trinity. If there had been the slightest suspicion of anything wrong against him, one may be sure that we should have heard of it at the Queensberry trial. But nothing was heard, because there was nothing, and the stories of his effeminacy at Oxford and the indignation provoked thereby, amongst the undergraduates, which one has since heard, were invented *pour les besoins de la cause*. I remember that when I went up, there was a story told of how some man at Magdalen who went in for æsthetic posturings had been "ragged" by his fellow-students, but this man was not a friend of Wilde, and had made himself objectionable in other ways besides wearing his hair long and sporting sage-green ties. Men are always being "ragged" at Oxford, but that does not imply that they are offenders against morality. It is quite possible that a wilful confusion has been created between the man I am

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referring to and Oscar Wilde, who had nothing whatever in common with him.

Wilde seems to have had a happy time at the 'Varsity. He always maintained a great affection for his Alma Mater, and the fact of having been at Oxford was ever a man's best passport to his respect and friendship. And, anarchist as he was in his heart, he appreciated the social advantages which are derived in England from having been educated at a public school and at the university. He told me, shortly before his disaster, that it was his intention to send both his sons to Eton and to "the House," and added that he considered that indispensable for their future welfare. "That was always my intention," he said; "though before my plays succeeded I used to wonder how I should manage it. Now, *grâce à Dieu*, it will be an easy matter."

Of course, Eton would have been impossible for them, after the *débâcle*. In England more than anywhere else the sins of the fathers must be paid for by the after-comers. It is recorded that at the time of Wilde's downfall his two boys were at a private school, kept, of course, by a reverend gentleman, professor of Christianity. This gentleman felt that in justice to his school, which was a *pepinière* for Eton and other public schools . . . for their own sakes, of course, he

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thought it better for the two boys to be removed. It would be so very unpleasant for them to remain there after what had happened.

Of these lads, Cyril, the elder, whom I only saw once as a baby in arms, has joined our band of heroes in immortality. He fell,¹ fighting for the country which had martyred his father, in the field of Flanders. The other brother, Vyvyan Holland, is, as I write, at the front, in the R.F.A. He was educated at Stonyhurst and went thence to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. On coming down, he was called to the Bar, but when the war broke out he applied for a commission in the R.F.A. I only saw him during the trials in which Robert Ross was involved, and I remember the touching tribute—in the witness-box at the Old Bailey—he paid to his father's friend, who, he said, had been a second father to him and his brother.

¹ 9th May 1915, aged twenty-nine.

CHAPTER XIII

My First Meeting with Oscar Wilde—Oscar Wilde and Burne-Jones—The Wooing of Paris—Her Indifference—A Prejudice and its Cause—Oscar of the Second Period—Aristophanes revealing Aristotle—The Statute of Limitations—A Murderer's Decoration—Metempsychosis—Oscar Wilde and John Sargent—Wilde seen for the First Time—Effect produced—The Survival of Personality—"Oscar is Sixty To-day"—Doctor Fairbairn on Wilde—Emile Zola's Moral Indignation.

My first introduction to Oscar Wilde took place in Paris in 1883, at the house of a Greek lady, an artist who had been intimately associated with the Pre-Raphaelites in London, for whose art she had such enthusiasm that, although a woman of very considerable wealth, she readily placed at the disposal of her friends, the painters, as a model, her own beauties and graces, and figured in more than one famous picture by Burne-Jones, Rossetti and the rest. She is the female figure in the picture entitled *The Beguiling of Merlin*, for instance. By the way, I never see a picture by Burne-Jones, or hear his name mentioned, without thinking of the very shabby way in which he rounded on his former friend and fogleman, Oscar Wilde, after the débâcle. Shortly after Wilde's arrest a demand came from

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the artist that all letters which he had written to the man who was then in prison should be immediately returned. This was done, no doubt by Mr Ross, who sent with the parcel a request that a like courtesy might be extended to the prisoner, and that all letters which Oscar Wilde had written to Burne-Jones should be sent back. A curt message came in answer to this request, to the effect that "those letters were all destroyed long ago."

Oscar Wilde had been in Paris some time before I met him. I cannot say that his presence there had attracted much attention, and I was then in a position to know very closely what was and what was not interesting Paris. Yet, with his usual skill in advertising himself, he had carefully prepared his Parisian campaign. He had brought over from London several copies of his *Poems*, and on settling down in the hotel on the Quai Voltaire (which, by the way, is barely three minutes' walk from the wretched inn in the rue des Beaux-Arts, where he came to perish) he dispatched these copies, each accompanied by a complimentary letter, to the literary and artistic celebrities of Paris. At the time of his arrest these letters, now having become documents of topical interest, were laid out for inspection in more than one salon, and

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pathetic it was too for his friends to see these proofs of his young ambitions and to remember to what ambition had brought him. And I may say right here that nowhere in Paris, amongst literary and artistic people, did I hear any sympathy with him expressed. Daudet said that I, being without children of my own, had no *voix au chapitre*, no right to say anything, and as for Zola, his indignation was so violent against Wilde that one might have fancied him the editor of a religious magazine, or the writer of moral text-books *ad usum Delphini*. As a matter of fact, the first time that I heard that Oscar Wilde was in Paris, that spring of 1883, was at the studio of a friend of mine, and I remember saying something uncomplimentary about the man to whom I was afterwards to become so much attached. I told Oscar about this hostility very shortly after we had made friends, and he said: "Robert, that was very wrong of you. Why should you be hostile towards me?"

I said that while it certainly did not arise from any feeling of jealousy it was probably prompted by my objection to his methods of furthering his literary standing: his methods of advertising and so on. I said that that sort of thing had never been practised by true men of letters,

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but by charlatans only, who enter upon literary pursuits, not from a love of art, but in a purely commercial spirit, relying upon their skill in self-puffery and advertisement to make the arduous profession of letters not one to be carried on on weak porridge, but, as his friends in the country from which he had just come would say, "a paying proposition."

"How very tedious you are, my dear Robert," he said. "For the rest you are quite in the right, and it is now months since I discarded my eccentricities of costume and had my hair cut. All that belonged to the Oscar of the first period. We are now concerned with the Oscar Wilde of the second period, who has nothing whatever in common with the gentleman who wore long hair and carried a sunflower down Piccadilly."

Here he broke off and muttered something about the "survival of personality," which I did not pay much attention to, but a version of which I afterwards discovered in one of his essays, *Pen, Pencil and Poison*. I often much regret that things that were going on on the quay interested me more that spring morning than what my friend in the white monkish cowl was saying in a kind of monologue addressed to himself. They were words, I am sure, that were well worth listening to, and one



OSCAR WILDE.

"O, I feel just as happy as a bright Sunflower!"
Lays of Christy Minstrelsy.

Æsthete of Æsthetes!
What's in a name?
The poet is WILDE,
But his poetry's tame.

Caricature in *Punch*
(Reproduced by the special permission of the Proprietors of *Punch*)

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of the very rare occasions on which Oscar Wilde in my presence revealed, under the frivolous, often flippant humorist and sayer of epigrams, the luminous philosopher that he was. It was as though an Aristophanes had for the briefest space lifted a mask and revealed Aristotle. The gist of what he said was that Time so completely transforms the individuality of man that he of to-day is an entirely different person from the same man seven years previously, and should not be held responsible for opinions then expressed or acts at that time done. This, in regard to civil matters, is a principle which the law of England, of course, recognises, as established by the Statute of Limitations. In France it has a far wider extension, and is equally applicable to criminal matters. The murderer of ten years ago, if he fortunately escapes the myrmidons of the law, to-day walks the boulevard as free as you or I; may indeed come to honours, postcidal honours, if I may coin a word, for I myself have seen the murderer of two women who had made good his flight, had awaited abroad the expiration of the term of proscription, had then returned to Paris, where an exhibition of his manufactured products (not corpses, but some kind of goods) attracted to him the favourable attention of the Minister of

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Commerce, who bestowed upon him the ribbon of the Legion of Honour, thus putting a gout of red into the buttonhole of a man whose hands, ten years previously, had dripped gouts and gouts of red.

I think that Oscar Wilde was so imbued with the idea that one is not rightfully to be held responsible for what one did some time ago—I do not know what term of proscription he had fixed in his mind—that his revolt against the severity of his sentence, indeed against any conviction, was enhanced by the feeling that it was unjust and illogical to try him, and far more so to punish him, for alleged offences supposed to have been committed when he was not the Oscar Wilde who stood in the dock. It is very certain, be it remarked *en passant*, that William Shakespeare of the *buen retiro* at Stratford-on-Avon was not Will of the Globe Theatre, that Samuel Johnson embodied about a dozen different Samuel Johnsons, that William Wordsworth, the friend of Brissot and the rue de Sèvres, would readily have sent to Widow Guillotine the William Wordsworth of Rydal Mount, stamp distributor and *Poeta Laureatus*, or, to come closer, that the Aubrey Beardsley who on his deathbed, on the Riviera, pitifully, and with gaunt and trembling fingers, traced that dis-

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regarded request¹ that the Lysistrata drawings of his might be destroyed was never at all the Aubrey Beardsley of the Smithers-ian orgies at the Hôtel Foyot.

Well, such was my feeling about Oscar Wilde that when, a few days after I had first heard of his presence in Paris, I received an invitation to dine at the house in the Avenue de Ségur, where the Greek lady artist lived, with the information that I should meet him there, my first strong impulse was not to go. In those days my *cultus* of literature was a very devotional one, and I had thought that in Oscar's masquerades an offence against the dignity of letters had been committed. Then curiosity overcame the objection, and I went. When I reached the house, I found John Sargent, the portrait painter, there. One did not quite realise at that time what a very great man this was. At that time Sargent's portraits did not enchant, but horrified the public. The desideratum of most artists, to get themselves talked about, and their pictures discussed, was equally attained. In those days, if at the Salon you saw a crowd of people surrounding some *toile*, making gestures of dismay or ridicule, and heard cries of "*Mais, c'est impossible!*" "*Quelle horreur!*" you might safely

¹ "Written in my death-agony—Aubrey Beardsley."

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wager that the exciting cause was the newest Sargent portrait. Sargent was good enough to take an artistic interest in me, and some time later asked me to come to his studio. He wanted to paint my portrait and also to model my head. I was foolish enough not to take advantage of an offer which would have resulted in securing for me a permanent and most efficacious advertisement. However, in those days I did not believe that in the profession of letters the publicity department, above all others, should be attended to. In England the most successful amongst my confrères are those upon whom this commercial axiom has most firmly impressed itself. However, I did come to be limned by Sargent, and in company no less distinguished than that of Oscar Wilde and Paul Bourget. We were all sitting together at the Café Lavenue, near the Gare Montparnasse, when Sargent proposed that he should make a sketch of the three *hommes de lettres*. The drawing was duly executed in an album which belonged to the proprietor of the café, and which contained a number of most interesting contributions, in prose, in verse, as well as drawings, caricatures and sketches by many artists, who, students at the time, have since become famous, though none perhaps in the same degree as our limner. This album was

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taken with him by the landlord after he had sold his business, and all my efforts to trace him and it have failed. I was anxious to secure the Wilde cum Bourget picture, by Sargent, for this book, but who shall say in what provincial *grénier* it lies mouldering ?

Oscar Wilde was very late that evening for dinner. I noticed that he had a habit of unpunctuality. On one occasion he kept me waiting on the Place Vendôme, where he had given me rendezvous, for over an hour, during which time I walked round and round that square, studying the Napoleon statue from every angle, and fuming against my tardy friend. When at last he did arrive he had not one word of excuse or apology, and when I, resenting this indifference, made some allusion to my peripatetics, we came as nigh to a quarrel as ever I was with him during the eighteen years that I was his friend. Those who disliked him, and *il y en avait*, used to say that he practised being late so as to draw especial attention to himself, to enhance his *entrée*, to get himself discussed, awaited, desired. It is recorded that one day he came very late indeed to a luncheon-party to which he had been bidden, and that when a reproachful hostess asked him to look at the clock, he answered airily : “ Oh, madam, what

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can that little clock know of what the great golden sun is doing? ” It was suggested that it was for the sole purpose of asking that question that he had kept everybody waiting and had filled with chagrin the bosom of a Mayfair *cordon-bleu*.

He was such a strange apparition when he did come, in his Count d’Orsay costume, with his turned-back cuffs, his coloured handkerchief, his *boutonnière*, his noticeable rings, and his mass of banked-up and artificially curled hair that I could not restrain a burst of almost hysterical laughter, and had to hurry across the drawing-room and bury my head in an album of drawings, to conceal the effect produced upon me. Sargent was standing by the table, and I remember that he noticed the condition I was in, and said something to me which I did not catch, but which may have been a rebuke, or perhaps a counsel: Whatever Wilde’s appearance was that first time that I saw him, it is certain that I was impressed also by the absolute ease of his manner, by that superiority of his—and there were several persons of distinction there that night—which made him at once, and thenceforward all through the evening, play the leading rôle in our gathering. He seized at once on the conversation, and held it. Few of us had a

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word to say, and after the first few moments we resigned ourselves willingly to the part of listeners. I felt some irritation at certain of his remarks on matters artistic ; I held that he was posturing and that under his leadership we were all playing, round that table, the rôles of some new comedy, to be called *Les Précieux Ridicules*, and so, during a momentary pause, after Wilde had remarked that he was in the habit of spending long hours in front of the statue of the Venus of Milos, I bluntly remarked that I knew nothing of the Louvre Museum, but that I often went to the big Louvre shop, where I found the best value for money in ties of any shop in Paris. This flippancy attracted Oscar Wilde's attention and approbation. He may have gauged the motive which had prompted the remark, and when two augurs meet they smile, do they not ? He said : " Oh, I like that," and thereupon opened for me a little wicket-gate into the discussion which was proceeding and from which, with most of the other guests, I had until then been excluded. And after dinner he continued to talk to me, and when we parted he begged me to call upon him on the following day, which I readily agreed to do, for he had thrown over me the spell of his undeniable fascination, a spell which still holds

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me, fifteen years after the earth has closed over him, who on that Paris night seemed to me less a mortal than a demigod, with his extraordinary vitality, a brazier filled with the unquenchable fire of genius. Now I know that some people who may do me the honour of reading this book will bridle at this remark of mine, and find it absurd with the absurdity of extravagance. I can only say that it is an absolute description, as exact as I can make it, of the effect produced upon me by Oscar Wilde on the first occasion on which I met him, and I may add that this was not only because I was a mere lad at the time. The same feeling that the man was a superman has never left me, and even to-day, as I have said, that extraordinary fascination lingers. His friends can hardly believe him dead. Men like these explain the creed of survival after death. Somebody the other day said to me : " Oh, Oscar is sixty to-day." Contemporary memoirs abound in accounts of the impression produced upon their writers by Oscar Wilde on their first meeting with him. Dour old Walt Whitman, even, succumbed to the great charm of the young Irish poet who visited him in his dust-laden cabin ; Verlaine, gone though he was in absinthe, admitted that the poet, " although he never offered me *une sibiche*," was most

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decidedly *un type épatant*, while here, from the recently published Memoirs of Doctor Fairbairn, head of Mansfield College, Oxford, and whilom Chairman of the Congregational Union, is a description of his first meeting with Oscar Wilde :

“In the evening went to Wemyss Reid’s dinner ; thirty present ; company included Lord Acton, Oscar Wilde, Bryce, Augustine Birrell, William Black and quite a host of others. . . . Birrell was full of talk, great on eighteenth-century men ; a man of letters, not ashamed of his Nonconformist descent—at least to me—yet thinking and speaking of Nonconformists as something outside him ; with which he was largely over and done. Wish it were possible to get over this attitude. . . . Oscar Wilde sat opposite to me ; very handsome fellow, hair parted in the middle, flower in the buttonhole, with the air about him that he ought to be looked at, and would improve anybody who would be wise enough to do so.”

Thus Dr Fairbairn, many years after Oscar Wilde’s disgrace and downfall. It is to be remarked, by the way, that whereas men of letters were particularly severe towards their fallen confrère, the dons and the academical,

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in whom a great odium against an alleged corrupter of youth might have been supposed to prevail, showed tolerance and a disposition towards pardon and forgetfulness. Zola, as I have pointed out, was the severest critic of Wilde in France, and as for the gentle and pious François Coppée, when approached by the Stuart Merrill committee to sign the petition which was being circulated amongst French men of letters, to secure for the prisoner some abatement of his sentence, replied that he was prepared to sign, but only in his capacity as a member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. On the other hand, the dons at Trinity, Dublin, express admiration and affection for their brilliant *alumnus*, Dr Mahaffy has retained his good opinion of the scholarly and scintillating youth, who accompanied him on one of his rambles in Greece, and there are dons at Oxford who will not listen to any aspersion on the unhappy Irishman who, having stripped his native university of all the laurels it had to offer, carried all before him at Oxford.

CHAPTER XIV

The Universities and Oscar Wilde—A Notable Exception—Dr Warren and Oscar Wilde—Wilde after Death—A Conversation *d'Outre Tombe*—Wilde's Spirit discusses the Hereafter—An Unpublished Wilde Poem—A Blake-like Intuition—Oscar Wilde at Work—Living *en Prince*—Oscar Wilde and Elagabalus—Mr Stuart Hay's Book, *The Amazing Emperor*—Comparisons that suggest themselves—Romantic Friendships—How misunderstood—Wilde's Memorable Defence of Same.

IT is indeed a curious and noteworthy circumstance, the tolerance shown by the professorial class towards Oscar Wilde, even amongst those, both in England and abroad, who may hold that he was justly convicted, a tolerance which almost equals that of the medical people who consider moral aberrations of that kind as amongst the diseases for which as yet they have discovered no remedies beyond the palliative bromidium. The university folk have, of course, read widely, recall the past history of the world and understand what to the ordinary individual is incomprehensible and therefore terrifying. Hence this tolerance.

A notable exception is, of course, Sir Herbert Warren, President of Magdalen. Mr Warren's professions of esteem for Oscar Wilde, when the

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latter was his contemporary at Magdalen, were multiple and great. Lord Alfred Douglas relates in his book that, Lady Queensberry having written to the President of Magdalen to ask him if he considered Wilde a suitable friend for her son, "the President, in reply, sent her a long letter, in which he gave Wilde a very high character, praised his great gifts and achievements of scholarship and literature, and assured her that I might consider myself lucky to have obtained the favourable notice of such an eminent man."

Since then, like many others of Wilde's former friends, Sir Herbert Warren has seen reason to modify his appreciation of this "eminent man." There might be said things, but does not Bossuet extol "*le grand art de ne pas tout dire*"? And so, with a shrug of the shoulders, forward.

I often wonder what in the Yonder-Land poor Oscar Wilde thinks about it all, about us all, about the courtiers of his first and of his latest hours, and his revival and rebirth, and the way the Philistine has been whistled back, and how to-day, from behind the ambushing hedges of repudiation, mercantile faces now peer up ecstatically at his apogee.

There died not very long ago in Capri, "that island of beauty, all burned up by the sun," an Italian poet, whose name was Giuseppe

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Vannicola, and who, as a gentle lady who was his neighbour writes me, was "only about thirty-five years old, with long snow-white hair," but had "a young and beautiful face, and such young eyes."

Well, Giuseppe Vannicola tells us in an article which appeared in the Naples *Mattino* after his death ("*articolo postumo*"), that in 1905 he had a conversation *d'outré tombe* with Oscar Wilde, and he records this conversation, but, unfortunately, did not ask him questions on the subjects indicated above, on which my wonder lasts.

It was at the house of André Gide. People had dined. *A poco a poco*, only four were left: Gide, Vannicola, the Belgian painter, Theo van Ruysseberg and an "intellectual lady who acted as writing medium."

Wilde's wraith was evoked from the Yonderland, and the first thing he communicated was: "*Doriano mi ha tradito*" (Dorian has betrayed me). Gide asked him his opinion about his trial, and Wilde said: "It was typically English. Perjurers, Hypocrites, Puritans." Vannicola said: "Thou knowest the *cultus* I have for thy works. I beg thee to express an opinion on me." Wilde answered: "Thanks, Vannicola, for the harmonies thou hast thought out and written about me." Ruysseberg said:

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“We would like to know your opinion on life beyond the grave.” Wilde answered: “A chaotic confusion of fluid nebulosities. A *cloaque* of souls and the essences of organic life.”

Gide then said: “And as to the existence of God?” Wilde answered: “That is still for us the great mystery.”

I cannot, *en passant*, refrain from expressing the wonder whether the author of *From Magdalen to Magdalene*, haply pacing his maternal cloisters, ever hears, whispering, the wonderful voice of the man whom he admired greatly many years ago, whispering in some such words as these:

“O well for him who lives at ease
With garnered gold in wide domain,
Nor heeds the plashing of the rain,
The crashing down of forest trees.

O well for him who ne'er hath known
The travail of the hungry years,
A father grey with grief and tears,
A mother weeping all alone.

But well for him whose feet hath trod
The weary road of toil and strife,
Yet from the sorrow of his life
Builds ladders to be nearer God.”

These lines, which were written by Oscar Wilde at Magdalen in 1876, and were originally

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published in *The Dublin University Magazine* for September of that year, seem to have been composed in that spirit of prophecy, or foresight, which to true poets is given. He, indeed, was to know the "travail of the hungry years"; he, too, was to have a mother "weeping all alone"; and he, too, "from the sorrows of his life," was to "build ladders to be nearer God."

William Blake had this intuition, this foresight, this power of prophecy in a pre-eminent degree, and it occurs to me that the above lines of Oscar Wilde may, in some measure, have been suggested to him by some reminiscence of something that William Blake wrote. I remember that when they were first read to me, I, being ignorant of their author's name, pronounced them the work of Blake. So if here Oscar Wilde borrowed the style and the philosophy of William Blake, he seems, with them, to have acquired also that power of bodement which enabled the boy Blake, as he and his father were leaving the studio of the magnificent Ryland, engraver to his Majesty, to say: "I do not like the look of that man, I think that he will come to be hanged." Writing these lines in a room on the walls of which there are many specimens of the art of Ryland, who, it will be remembered, *did* come to be hanged, I am

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constantly reminded of this anecdote, and as often I reflect how entirely in me was lacking that power which was possessed both by William Blake and Oscar Wilde. For never once, until the avalanche descended and overwhelmed my friend, in 1895, had I any inkling of what the future held in store for him. His ultimate fate was the very last *dénouement* to his life that I could have predicted. Of course, had his aberrations been revealed to me, it would have been easy to foretell disaster, but these were concealed with a discretion that almost amounted to the cunning with which maniacs are able to shroud from their friends the demon-hags that ride them.

On that first night in Paris, he appeared to me one of the most wonderful beings that I had ever met, and it seemed to me that there was no prize which the world offers to endeavour and genius (which is another word for endeavour) to which he might not aspire.

This opinion was more than confirmed when, next morning, having made the long journey from Pump Street, Passy, down to his hotel on the Quai Voltaire, I spent several hours in his company. I knew him brilliant beyond description—and be it remembered that I was then living in a circle of the most brilliant conversationalists

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in Europe, for I was a habitu  of Victor Hugo's house, where one met everybody who counted—I had yet to discover that he had constrained himself to that constant labour and industry which, as Balzac says, is the law of art as it is the law of creation. Any misgivings that I might have had, that here was a foppish dilettante of letters, spending his life, like those semi-artists of whom Balzac writes, in "talking himself," were immediately dispelled when I came into his sitting-room, a fine apartment, commanding a view of the Seine and the Louvre, on the first floor of the H tel du Quai Voltaire. He was dressed, as I have described, in his Balzacian gaberdine, but here affectation began and ended. His table was overlaid with papers—he was then working on his *Duchess of Padua*—and a glance at these sheets showed that many of the lines had been written over and over again. Laboriousness and the function of the whetstone were apparent. "Like Count d'Orsay's ties," I said, "these, I suppose, are your failures?"

The only accessory on that writing-table which suggested the dilettante was a huge box of cigarettes, and for an ash-tray a large, blue china bowl, half full already of stumps and ashes. Some words of Zola then occurred to me, where the author of *L'Assommoir* speaks with contempt

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of those men of letters who turn out their prose while "smoking cigarettes and tickling their beards." These words occur in a passage where he also speaks of "the intolerable weight of a pen."

"I have been working all the morning," he said; "so now we will go out to lunch."

I was disappointed by this invitation, for I had hoped to be with him, *chez lui*, and for lunch the hotel could have supplied us quite adequately. But Oscar Wilde had still, at that time, a balance at a Parisian bank, the remainder of what he had brought over from his American lecturing tour, and nothing would satisfy him then except the most expensive restaurants. He never took any meals at his hotel beyond the first *petit déjeuner*, except when his funds had run out. The impression he produced upon me that first day was that he was a man of considerable fortune. He lived *en prince*, and was so reckoned by the hotel servants and restaurant waiters. The fact was that, beyond his balance at the Paris bank and his expectations from Mary Anderson, on account of *The Duchess of Padua*, which was being written to her order, he had apparently no means whatever.

In those days the Café de Paris, in the Avenue de l'Opéra, which was owned by one of the

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Bignons, the overlords of fashionable Parisian catering, was a house which was reputed to be exclusively patronised by millionaires, and it was to this house that Oscar Wilde took his guest, "a poor clerk nowise great or fair," who would have been amply satisfied with a luncheon *chez Duval*, which would not have cost one-tenth of what he paid for our *déjeuner* at the Café de Paris. I remember mildly remonstrating when I saw whither he was taking me, but he said that it behoved the artist and *littérateur* to show the *bourgeois* that he must abandon his idea that the man of letters is invariably a needy Bohemian dwelling in a garret and for the most part starving. "It's a duty we owe to the dignity of letters," he said, with his inimitable, boyish and gleeful laugh. Many years later a similar remark was made to me in the palatial restaurant of the Plaza Hotel in New York, where I was dining with an American author, reputed to turn out nothing but "best sellers." I drew his attention to the fact that there were millionaires on every side of our table; indeed for jewels coruscating all around us we might have been dining in Aladdin's Cave. "And that's just the reason," he said, "why I like coming here, just to show these people that, though nothing but a writer, I can put up as good a dinner to

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any friend of mine as the richest amongst them. It's a sort of education for them, and that being laid down, let's have another Martini."

I take it that Zola's extravagant expenditure on furnishing and decorating his houses—an extravagance which provoked the irony of Mr George Moore—was prompted largely—for personally Zola was a man inclined to frugality—by the same wish to *épater les bourgeois*.

In the case of Oscar Wilde, however, the love of extravagance appears to have been instinctive. He might endeavour to explain and palliate his folly in the way suggested above; it remains certain that the mania of prodigality held him and drove him powerless to resist. There are, in J. Stuart Hay's masterly *Life of the Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus*, many passages which, *mutatis mutandis*, seem strangely applicable to this case also. Indeed I will go so far as to say that, for a comprehension of the real Oscar Wilde, this book or Lampridius's *Life*, or other classical works which deal with the amazing Elagabalus might be studied with advantage.

"The psychology of extravagance" (writes Mr Stuart Hay) "has not yet been examined, so we are still free to condemn what we do not

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understand. Megalomania we all know something about, and can all condemn as experts."

Oscar Wilde's extravagance and eccentricity in dress find their parallel—*mutatis mutandis*—in that other marvellous boy who perished in pride, and in this connection there may be quoted from Mr Stuart Hay a passage not exempt from irony :

"Of course" (he writes) "it is not a pleasant taste, this overlaying of the body with an inordinate display of wealth, even when done merely for the honour of one's God, as Elagabalus protested. Unfortunately, it is still known both in the Plutocratic and Sacerdotal worlds. Certain minds still revolt, still see its snobbery, vanity and degeneracy, are even foolish enough to imagine that the personal vanity of such functionaries will one day renounce what is their main means of attraction."

It is quite possible that Oscar Wilde, who was steeped in the paganism of Rome and Greece, and to whom, no doubt, the career and character of the amazing emperor were as familiar as to us are the personalities and performances of the more sedulously puffed of our contemporaries, may instinctively have set out to imitate, in his small way, a personage who must have aroused

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in his mind, if all that is said is true, an extraordinary interest. I may say, however, that I never once heard him refer to Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, though many were his remarks on Nero, whom Heliogabalus so much surpassed in all that was undesirable. He modelled the dressing of his hair, after he had shorn the long locks of the æsthetic period, on the coiffure of Nero in the bust in the Louvre, and in one of his earlier letters to me speaks of how he is amazing London with it.

He dressed as he lived, as though a man of very large means ; he had abundant jewellery, though not offensively displayed. His cigarette-case was of silver or of gold—I do not remember that he ever carried a watch, or haply it had joined the Berkeley Gold Medal *chez ma tante*—he had a silver match-box with a huge opal in the lid, and on his fingers were noticeable rings, including a green scarab, the loss of which, in Paris, in those early days, “was the great grief of my life.”

It may sound absurd to compare Oscar Wilde to Heliogabalus or Nero—though, of course, intellectually he towered above both those gentlemen—but in extravagance both of dress and expenditure he appears to have imitated them as far as his means allowed of. But, of

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course, while Marcus Aurelius Antoninus had one hundred million pounds to spend every year of the four years of his reign . . .

I cannot leave Mr J. Stuart Hay's book without quoting two more passages, which refer to a side of my subject's character with which, knowing nothing about it in connection with him, I am incompetent to deal. I am in entire agreement with their author.

“Since the world began” (writes Mr Hay) “no one has been wholly wicked, no one wholly good. The truth about Elagabalus must lie between the two extremes, admitting, however, a congenital twist towards the evil tendencies of his age. He had habits which are regarded by scientists less as vices than as perversions, but which at that time were accepted as a matter of course. Men were then regarded as virtuous when they were brave, when they were honest, when they were just ; and this boy did, despite his hereditary taint, show more than flashes of these virtues. The idea of using ‘virtuous’ in its later sense occurred, if at all, in jest merely, as a synonym for a eunuch. It was the matron and the vestal who were supposed to be virtuous and their virtue was often supposititious.”

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In the Roman sense of the word, then, Oscar Wilde, who certainly was brave, honest and just, was "virtuous" in a pre-eminent degree.

"Quite a cursory study of authorities on psychology, such as Krafft-Ebbing, Bloch, Forel, Moll, etc., will show us that characters like Elagabalus have occasionally appeared, and are still known in history. They are almost curiosities of nature, and are rarely if ever responsible for their own instincts, neither are they cruel nor evil by nature.

"To-day we are inclined to regard the romantic friendships exhibited in the stories of David and Jonathan, Herakles and Hylas, Apollo and Hyacinth, to mention no others, as the outcome of somewhat similar natures, and we decry some of the noblest patriots, tyrannicides, lawgivers and heroes, in the early ages of Greece, because they regarded the bond of male friendship as higher and nobler than what they called the sensual love for women or because they received friends and comrades with peculiar honour on account of their staunchness in friendship. Nevertheless, psychologists have noted that this tendency towards the more elevated forms of homo-sexual feeling is still to be found, more or less developed, amongst religious leaders and other persons with strong ethical instincts.

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It is only, therefore, when this tendency occurs in slightly abnormal minds that we excite our passions against men for whom the only fitting reward is an application of the stake and faggot, without further inquiry.

“To the vulgar-minded, all persons who present deformities, whether physical or mental, are subjects of derision and hatred; to those who realise something of the disabilities under which these unfortunates are labouring, they are objects of either active or passive sympathy—in the abstract, of course; should the insane, the leprous, or even the man of genius get in our way, we, as normal persons, feel ourselves justified in ridding the world of its nuisance.”

Now here may be the proper place to quote that memorable answer made by Oscar Wilde, in the course of his first trial before Mr Justice Charles, to the question put to him by Mr Gill :

“What is the ‘Love that dare not speak its name’?”

“The ‘Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you

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find in the sonnets of Michael Angelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michael Angelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the 'Love that dare not speak its name' and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him. That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it."

These words, it may here be recorded, created a sensation in Court. As the author of *Oscar Wilde Three Times Tried* relates: "As he stopped speaking there was loud applause, mingled with some hisses, in the public gallery of the Court. Mr Justice Charles at once said: 'If there is the slightest manifestation of feeling, I shall have the Court cleared. There must be

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complete silence preserved.' The speech of Wilde was declared by some 'to be the finest speech of an accused man since that of Paul before Agrippa.' It thrilled everyone in the Court. Mr Robert Buchanan considered it 'marvellous.'"

CHAPTER XV

Wilde as a Trencherman—A *Gourmet*, not a *Gourmand*—His Care of his Figure—A Note written in Prison—Cooking an Art—*The Lady of the Red Roses*—Red and Yellow Wine—*The Duchess of Padua*—Wilde's Agreement with Mary Anderson—"Dining with the Duchess"—Mary Anderson's Decision—Wilde's Sang-froid—Consequences to Oscar Wilde—The Duchess no longer entertains—"Quite a Nice Little Place"—Wilde's Faith in the *Duchess*—*Opus Secundum*—Its Fate on the Stage—Was the *Duchess* a Hoodoo?

"WILDE was a doughty and assiduous trencherman. I would have backed him to eat the head off a brewer's drayman three times a day, and his capacity for whisky-and-soda knew no bounds." Thus Lord Alfred Douglas. If this were true we might find in it another resemblance to the amazing emperor. "To food and drink the Emperor was as much addicted as the traditional city alderman, though his imagination certainly surpassed that of the retired tradesman, at least in quality and design. . . . Lampridius states that no feast cost Elagabalus less than 100,000 sesterces, and often reached the stupendous figure of 300,000 sesterces, *tout compris*."

I cannot say, however, that I ever noticed

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any such defect as *gourmandise* in Oscar Wilde, nor, as I have said, any inclination either to alcoholic excess. It is, however, certain that after he left prison and was seeking, in a real and palpable hell, any artificial paradise that he could find, he did indulge unconscionably in alcohol, and Douglas's statement that during the last years in Paris he was often seen on the verge of intoxication is confirmed by other witnesses. At the time, however, when I first made his acquaintance, and right down till a year or two before he died, he appeared to me abstemious rather than self-indulgent, and one reason for this was that he was exceedingly sensitive about his tendency towards corpulence and did all he could to keep his figure the figure of youth. I remember that once I offended him quite innocently by asking him if he could explain the use or derivation of the word "habit" in such an expression as "a man of a full habit." He flared up. "What do you mean by that question, Robert?" he cried, as though suspecting that I was making an allusion to his *embonpoint*, when nothing had been further from my mind. I remember also possessing a little note of his, written on blue prison paper, which began: "Yes, it is perfectly true," and continued by begging the person to whom the

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note was addressed, one of the warders in Reading Gaol, to convey in writing some message to a fellow-prisoner, by "shoving" the note under the door of his cell. This "Yes, it is perfectly true," was in answer to a question which the warder had addressed to him in writing as to the authenticity of an anecdote about him, which had appeared in one of the papers and related how Oscar Wilde being at a reception was talking to some *grande dame* when a noble quidnunc came up behind him, slapped him on the back, and exclaimed: "Why, Oscar, you are getting fatter and fatter." Without turning round, Oscar said: "Yes, and you are getting ruder and ruder," and quietly continued his conversation with the lady. This note was among various papers which were stolen from me, and though that collection contained some very extraordinary items, it was perhaps the document whose loss I most regret. For, amongst other things, in Oscar's use of that word "shoving" I saw the one and only sign that prison environment had weakened his good taste, had soiled his nicety. In the old days he would never have used such a word, he who, considering himself a Lord of Language, had an extreme fastidiousness of vocabulary. I remember that we were once looking over some

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of Wordsworth's sonnets and that Oscar came upon a line whose terminal was made to rhyme with "love," for which the poet had employed the word "shove." "Robert, Robert," said Oscar, "what is the meaning of this?"

When I first knew him, being careful of his figure, he was inclined rather to the practices of Mr William Banting than to habits of gluttony. I have often seen him refuse a dish urged upon him by a persuasive *maitre d'hôtel*, with the remark: "Il faut souffrir pour être beau." But if he was never, to my knowledge, a *gourmand*, I always knew him as a *gourmet di primo cartello*. He had a very extensive knowledge of the art of cookery. And as an art, *la haute cuisine* is considered in Paris, where many most distinguished men of letters have not disdained to employ their pens in its glorification. In England it is not so, and during one of Wilde's trials, one of the bewigged gentlemen, who may be supposed to have been as familiar with Mrs Beeton as he was ignorant of the gentle Brillat-Savarin, who cross-examined him, endeavoured to make a point against him with a sarcastically ejaculated "What, another art?" when cookery was under discussion. He was a master at ordering a delicate repast and surprised me with his *maestria*, who knew him to be

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of Irish descent and hold the Irish amongst the very Philistines of gastronomy. I remember the interest which he took in a series of stories which I was writing for a paper which devoted itself to the pleasures of the table. These stories were called *Romances of the Table*, and the point of each was that, in the guise of a tale, some recipe should be introduced. He was good enough to describe them as ingenious as well as literary, and did me the honour of using, as a subject of conversation, one of the stories, which was called *The Lady of the Red Rosès*, and which narrated how a fair Greek lady encouraged her young admirer to bring her roses and roses, not indeed to carpet with their crimson petals the floor of her withdrawing-room, but simply because she was very fond of that Greek preserve known as *rhodosaccharee*, which is a *compote* of roses much appreciated in the Morean peninsula.

I remember nothing about that *déjeuner chez Bignon*, at which I first partook of Oscar's bread and salt, beyond that it was luxurious and expensive, though certainly not Gargantuan. As the wine was served, I remarked to Oscar that I did not know why people spoke of "white" wine, when the word "yellow," which designated its colour correctly, was a much more pictorial

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word. He immediately adopted the suggestion, and from thenceforward never spoke of white wine, but of yellow wine. The expression occurs in an unfortunate letter that he wrote to one of his friends, a letter which was used against him with damning effect at his trial, where he tells this friend that he is to him as "red and yellow wine." The luxuriousness of the repast and the indifference with which he discharged the formidable bill that was presented whilst our coffee was making itself on the table between us, confirmed me in my conclusion that he was a man of wealth. As a matter of fact, he was living on his expectations from *The Duchéss of Padua*. It will be remembered that he was writing this under contract with a certain Mr Hamilton Griffin, acting on behalf of Mary Anderson. By this contract he had agreed "to write for Miss Mary Anderson a first-class Five-Act tragedy to be completed on or before March 1st, 1883." The "first-class Five-Act tragedy" was to become Mary Anderson's absolute property, the consideration being a payment to him of five thousand dollars, of which one thousand dollars was paid down on signing the contract, and the balance of which—namely, four thousand dollars—was to be paid "on Mary Anderson's acceptance and approval of the said

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tragedy." So that in those February days when I first met Oscar Wilde he was in the expectation of receiving, some time in March, the sum of eight hundred pounds. He was therefore natur-

The Duchess of Padua.

A Tragedy

—

written for
Mary Anderson
by

Oscar Wilde.

DUCHESS OF PADUA

Facsimile of first leaf of Original Manuscript

ally full of the *Duchess* and spoke much about her. "We dine with the Duchess to-night," he would sometimes say. At the time I did not understand what he meant. I well understood the expression, "to dine with the Duke," for which

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the French equivalent is “to dance before the buffet”—an expression familiar to most young men who have practised the art and craft of letters in Paris. I do not know on what grounds Mary Anderson rejected the manuscript. She may possibly have regretted her bargain and have taken advantage of the fact that the manuscript, which was not finished till 15th March, did not reach her until more than a month after the date stipulated in the agreement. It cannot have been on the ground that the work was not a “first-class” tragedy, for such it has now been universally recognised to be. I happened to be with Oscar Wilde in his sitting-room in the Hôtel du Quai Voltaire when her cabled decision reached him. It was some time towards the end of April. Not having heard from her, and his funds running low, he had that morning cabled to her in California, begging for an answer. We were sitting smoking, when the waiter brought in *une dépêche pour Monsieur*. Wilde opened it and read the disappointing news without giving the slightest sign of chagrin or annoyance. He tore a tiny strip off the blue form, rolled it up into a pellet, and put it into his mouth. Then he passed the cable over to me, and said: “Robert, this is very tedious.” After that he never referred again to his dis-

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appointment. I admired his sang-froid greatly at the time, though I did not know then that this refusal of his work meant the loss to him of a large sum of money on which he had absolutely counted, a tremendous set-back in his career as a dramatist, and, worse still, the obligation to give up his elegant existence in Paris and to return to London and the drudgery of the provincial lecture platform. But, as I say, he showed no disappointment at all, and a minute or two later was chatting gaily on something as remote from *The Duchess of Padua* as California is from the Quai Voltaire. We were to dine together that night, and when the time came for us to go out he said: "We sha'n't be able to dine with the Duchess to-night. It is rather a case of Duke Humphrey, but what do you say to a *choucroute garnie* at Zimmer's?" I insisted, however, that *Sauerkraut* and sausages were not proper food for a poet, and begged him to come with me, as my guest for once in a while, to a "little place on the other side of the water, where they don't do you at all badly." To which he having consented, I led him by devious routes and down a side street and by a side entrance into that very Café de Paris where we had first lunched together. It was not until we had got into the *salle* that opened on to the

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Avenue de l'Opéra that he recognised the place, and then he kept up my little pleasantry. "Quite a nice little place," he said, and all through the meal we continued the joke and pretended that we were dining at some *marchand de vins* "patronised by the cab-drivers" than which, in those days, an eating-house of that order could have no better recommendation. After dinner we went to the Folies-Bergères for that night's performance, at which a journalist friend had sent me a box. But after we had occupied the *loge* a few minutes he suggested that we should leave. "There are occasions," he said, "on which a *loge* is a pillory," and the fact was that he had been a great deal stared at while he was sitting there.

Since I have realised what Mary Anderson's refusal meant to him, and remember how he took what to many would have been a knock-down blow, my admiration for his self-control and his dignity has become great. Most men would have grumbled, men who might have consoled themselves for the loss of eight hundred pounds at a time when they were well-nigh penniless, but who would have suffered in their vanity at the rejection of their work. And I know that Oscar Wilde felt that in *The Duchess of Padua* he had achieved a masterpiece. He never said so,

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of course, for, contrary to what has been alleged against him, he rarely spoke of his work at all, and never in boastful terms. Indeed, self-glorification he described as vulgar in the extreme, and I have heard him lecture on this subject a youth who was given to boasting. But a glance at the title-page of the first printed edition of this play (privately printed as manuscript), of which only four copies are known to exist, will show the importance he attached to this tragedy as a work of art. In the top left-hand corner of the title-page stand the words OP. II. It was the custom of the great musical composers, of such masters as Beethoven, Bach and Wagner, thus to number their works. It is grandiloquent: "My Second *Opus*." It classifies the book as a work, as an *opus*, by which masterpiece is suggested. It implies that the reader will be pleased to know the standing numerically of this particular masterpiece in the cycle of the author's productions. It need not be remembered as a first-class tragedy named *The Duchess of Padua*, it will be sufficient for the public to recall it as Oscar Wilde's Second *Opus*.

Well, this second *Opus* had been curtly rejected, and was threatened with the oblivion which very nearly enshrouded it, for it was not until 1891 that it was produced in New York by Lawrence

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OP. II.

THE

DUCHESS OF PADUA:

A Tragedy of the XVI Century

BY

OSCAR WILDE,

AUTHOR OF "VERA," ETC.

Written in Paris in the XIX Century.

PRIVATELY PRINTED AS MANUSCRIPT.

Facsimile of Title-page

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Barrett, and that anonymously, not as *Opus* the Second, nor indeed as *The Duchess of Padua*, but under the title of *Guido Ferranti*. It enjoyed a *succès d'estime* and was well received by the critics. *The New York Tribune* found that it was the work of "a practised writer and a good one," and the critic mentioned that he had had the pleasure of reading it several years previously in manuscript, when it was called *The Duchess of Padua*, and knew it to be the work of Oscar Wilde. The piece only ran from Monday, 26th January, till 14th February—and was performed twenty-one times in all. It seems to have brought evil fortune upon Lawrence Barrett, who died a few weeks later. When, in 1906, it was performed in Hamburg, the text being the authorised German translation of Doctor Max Meyerfeld, the man who played the principal part went raving mad upon the stage. She was not a lucky hostess, that *Duchess of Padua*, *chez qui* Oscar Wilde and I dined in those early days in Paris.

Many authors would have grumbled, would have voiced their disappointment, might have questioned the actress's judgment or taste, or possibly her *bona fides*. Oscar Wilde never said a word; indeed, to me, never spoke of the Duchess again. The fact is he had a tremendous

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confidence in himself. His motto was *Quo non ascendam?* and he believed in its promise. He used to speak of his "measureless ambition." To have a Second *Opus* set aside was as nothing to a man whose teeming brain projected a cycle of masterpieces. Still, self-confidence or prepotency, his conduct on that occasion, as on similar occasions subsequently, calls for admiration, and shows him a strong man.

CHAPTER XVI

Oscar Wilde and Theodore Child—Oscar Wilde and the Painters—Whistler's Attack—Wilde's *Riposte*—Oscar Wilde as a Draughtsman—Ambition to become a Painter—Success as a Caricaturist—His Assumption of Qualities—No *Maestria* without Apprenticeship—His Cult for Balzac—Our Noctambulous Conversations—A Definition of the Classics—"Ossie" and Isola—Oscar Wilde and the Macabre—A *Soirée* with Maurice Rollinat—Wilde's Worship of Shelley and Keats—His Advice to study Chatterton—Wilde's Kindness to Literary Aspirants—A Letter from Wilde.

FROM his conversation in those days, I gathered that he was enlarging his circle of acquaintances, and for the most part amongst Parisian artists. As a friend of Edmund Yates, proprietor and editor of *The World*, he had brought over to Paris an introduction to that famous Paris correspondent, Theodore Child, who had piloted him to the houses of various of his friends. It was through Child that he came to know several painters, for the most part ignored in those days, but now of European reputation. I remember his describing to me a visit he paid to the great Degas, to reach whose garret studio he had had to make the perilous ascent of a ladder. He thought it necessary to explain Degas's art to me,

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but I am afraid his disquisition was wasted upon me. I did not understand it then ; I do not think that I should understand it now. I never have been able to make up my mind whether Oscar Wilde was indeed qualified to speak as a critic of art—of pictures, that is to say—or whether he postured—as Whistler accused him brutally of doing—as knowing a subject on which he was no better informed than you or I.

“What has Oscar in common with Art?” asks Whistler in a letter addressed to *The World* for 17th November 1886, “except that he dines at our tables and picks from our platters the plums for the pudding he peddles in the provinces? Oscar—the amiable, irresponsible, esurient Oscar—with no more sense of a picture than of the fit of a coat, has the courage of the opinions . . . of others.”

It may be remembered that to this Oscar replied in the following note, which appeared in *The World* for November 1886 :—

“From OSCAR :

“ATLAS, this is very sad. With our James ‘vulgarity begins at home,’ and should be allowed to stay there.—*À vous,*

“OSCAR.”

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This evoked from the spiteful "James" the following :—

" To whom :

" ' A poor thing,' Oscar!—'but,' for once, I suppose, ' your own.' "

I have often wondered since why Oscar Wilde, if it be true that he was not qualified to speak on pictures, should have made the pretence to such knowledge. I know that all his life he was interested in art. He was a clever draughtsman. In an admirable letter written from Portora School to his mother, when he was about fourteen years of age, in which, while asking her for some abstruse quarterly review (the very last thing one would have expected a fourteen-year-old schoolboy to desire), and commenting on the colour of some flannel shirts that his mother had sent him, he sends her a caricature, very skilfully done, representing the woe of "ye hamperless boy" while contemplating Oscar and Willie dealing with the contents of a hamper which Lady Wilde had sent them. It is known further that when, just before leaving Oxford, he was asked what profession he intended to follow, he answered : " If I followed my inclination, I would go and live in a garret in Paris and paint beautiful pictures." Some of his original

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manuscript—as, for instance, one of the pages of *The Sphinx*—is enlivened with little caricature sketches, very cleverly done. I do not think that his sense of colour has ever been contested. I should say that possibly he only pretended to a larger knowledge of and a deeper interest in painting than he really possessed. I remember that once, having given me a reproduction of one of Puvis de Chavannes's pictures, on which he had written the words, "*Rien n'est vrai que le beau,*" he made certain suggestions as to how I ought to have the picture framed. The narrow wood border was to be coloured grey, with a fillet of vermilion bisecting it. The effect was decidedly unpleasing, and I have often thought since that he said the first things that came into his head, and suggested vermilion because he liked the mouthing of that sonorous and pictorial word.

I must quote here, from another book of mine (*Twenty Years in Paris*), a passage in which I endeavoured to explain this foible of his and to point out certain consequences which resulted to him from yielding to it :

“ I think that the man who got closest to the truth in his reading of Wilde's character was the author of the review of *De Profundis* which

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appeared in *The Times*, when he refers to his assumption of characteristics and qualities which were not his own, which indeed were alien to his real nature. And I think that one great mistake which Oscar Wilde made in life was to profess knowledge on subjects of which he had been too indolent to study the technique. There are certain things which not the intuition of the greatest genius who ever lived can impart. One has to go to school and start at A.B.C. under the shadow of the rod. There was nothing which he could not have done, if he had cared to master essential rules. Feeling that he might have attained, had he chosen to do so, to almost universal knowledge, he allowed himself to assume it. He wrote and spoke on many subjects on which he was not qualified to write or speak—not because the profound comprehension of them was beyond his reach, but because he had neglected the preliminaries essential to this comprehension. I believe that this was the reason why, in Paris, he never enjoyed that admitted mastership which was his in England. The French do not believe in accomplishment by sheer force of intuition. They train their future masters of the arts. They insist upon technical training for even the rarest genius. They send Talma, Rachel, Sarah Bernhardt,

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Coquelin, Mounet-Sully to school. They have the Beaux-Arts and Rome for their painters and sculptors, and Rome and the Conservatoire for their musicians and composers.”

If pretence there were, it was very well sustained and deceived many, not the least intelligent, of his contemporaries. We read in Ernest La Jeunesse's masterly article on Oscar Wilde, written after his death, a tribute to his omniscience. “*Il savait tout,*” wrote Ernest La Jeunesse.

With me, however, he spoke little about pictures ; in matters of pictorial art and music he considered me a Philistine, indeed more than once told me so. But we conversed almost continually on literature, in which my reading was at least as extensive as his own, and more diversified, for he knew neither German nor Italian. He was full in those days of the works of Balzac, as to which he said that they had escaped the usual fate of classics, “ books about which everybody talks, but which no one reads.” I had read no Balzac at all at the time, and it was Oscar Wilde who revealed to me the wonderful humanities of the author of *The Human Comedy*. I remember one long noctambulous walk through moonlit Paris, during which he

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told me the story of *Eugénie Grandet*. He started talking as we were leaving the "not at all bad little eating-house on the Avenue de l'Opéra," and brought the marvellous tale to a conclusion as we leant over the parapet of the Pont Neuf and watched the moon silvering the spires of Notre Dame. When I came to read the story in its original form, it seemed to me, as Balzac told it, not at all equal in pathos to the version as rendered by Wilde, and I remember that years after I suggested to him that he should retell, for the English-speaking world, all Balzac's stories.

He said: "I should consider it extremely impertinent on my part to do so." Theophile Gautier and Flaubert were two other French authors who were greatly in his mind at that time. I learned most of the *Emaux et Camées* from hearing him recite them.

When he was not talking about literature, he used to entertain me with stories of his childhood, which seems to have been a very happy one, and I well remember the pride and enthusiasm with which he used to talk about his mother. Of his father he spoke with reverence, and even detailed his foibles as though they called for admiration. It was from his own lips, another late-walking night in Paris, that I listened

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to the lines *Requiescat* and heard the story of the little sister Isola, "dancing like a golden sunbeam about the house," in speaking of whom he drew nearer to sensibility than on any other topic. This little Isola died on 23rd February 1867, at the age of eight, but lived eternally in her brother's memory. Not very long before he died he was speaking to me of her, and he said that it was perhaps well that she had not lived "to see me like this." She was buried at Mostrim. "The doctor," to quote from Stuart Mason's wonderful *Bibliography*, "who attended Isola in her illness described her as 'the most gifted and lovable child' he had ever seen. 'Ossie' was at the time 'an affectionate, gentle, retiring, dreamy boy' of twelve, at Portora School, whose 'lonely and inconsolable grief' sought vent 'in long and frequent visits to his sister's grave in the village cemetery.'" This poem has by many critics been considered one of the best that Oscar Wilde ever wrote. It was included in a volume entitled *Echoes from Kottabos*, published in 1906, edited by Professor R. Y. Tyrell and Sir Edward Sullivan, and was spoken of in various reviews as "the brightest gem in the collection," as a "lovely dirge, published already in several anthologies, but too good not to bear quoting once more" and

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(in *The Daily News*) as "the best thing in the book."

He had already in those days a liking for the morbid, and was a great reader of Baudelaire, whom he frequently quoted. The *Fleurs du Mal* was a bedside book of his at the Hôtel du Quai Voltaire. He delighted in that dreadful poem, *La Charogne*, in which a lover, addressing his fair one, describes how in a country walk he came across the decaying carcass of some animal, details the horrors that he saw in progress, and exclaims: "Such will you be, O Queen of Graces." I never gathered whether it was the skill of Baudelaire's technique in this poem or the *macabre* horror of its subject that principally attracted him, for he was perhaps equally enthusiastic about that other beautiful poem, entitled *La Musique*, which begins:

"La Musique souvent me prend comme une mer,
Vers ma pâle étoile.
Sous un plafond de brume ou dans un vaste éther,
Je mets à la voile."

Another poem in this book which he used to quote as a model of style and beauty was the one called *L'Inconnue*. A man is sitting outside a boulevard café; a woman dressed in deep mourning passes. They exchange glances; the woman passes on, "a lightning flash, then the

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night." The poet asks, will he ever see her again, elsewhere, far from here, too late, never perhaps. "O toi que j'eusse aimée, o toi qui le savais."

But that he had a hankering after the horrible was shown me when one day he asked me to dine with him at the Hôtel Voltaire with Rollinat, a decadent poet who had recently published a terrible book called *The Hand of Troppmann*, which contained the long poem from which the volume took its name, a poem which described, with every horrid detail, those dreadful murders with which the name of Troppmann is associated in eternal infamy. Rollinat, who afterwards rescued himself from his surroundings and became a distinguished musician—to meet eventually, alas, with an end of unspeakable cruelty—was then in his absinthe days, and I can remember few more dreadful moments than when, after dinner was over, he treated us to a mimetic recitation of this poem. I was for leaving the room, but was checked by our host, who seemed to be enjoying the ghastly performance intensely. When the poet, foaming at the mouth and shaking all over from nervous exhaustion, had finished, and sank back on the couch from which he had risen to speak his lines, Wilde thanked him with the most exaggerated praise, and addressed him as "Master."

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At the same time he showed an intense delight in worthier verse. He had a farrago of quotations from the English poets in his head, and most delighted in Keats and Shelley. I think that of all that Keats wrote he chiefly admired the *Ode to a Grecian Urn*; the superior *Ode to a Nightingale* I never heard him mention. In the *Grecian Urn* the lines he seemed fondest of, by reason, as he explained, of their pathos, were those beginning :

“ What little town by river or seashore.”

“ The poor little town,” he said, “ emptied of its folk. Poor little town ! ” What was pathetic and expressed in simple language seemed to make a special appeal to him. The quotation from Shelley which I most frequently heard from him were those towards the end of *The Cenci* where Beatrice, going out to execution, begs her mother to “ tie up my hair in any simple knot.” Witnessing the real delight he took in the simple and pathetic, I could not but feel that his professed admiration for the horrors of Baudelaire and Rollinat was but a pose, as much a pose as his professed liking for absinthe when he first took to drinking that poison as an *apéritif*.

In later years he used frequently to recommend the reading and study of Chatterton to

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people who wrote to him for advice on literary study. I never once heard him refer to this poet in those days when we ranged together the whole of the English Parnassus, and cannot even now understand what it was in Chatterton that particularly appealed to him.

He was, by the way, always ready to assist those who came to him for advice. I append a copy of a letter which he wrote from Tite Street to a young man who had written to him, sending him a manuscript, and asking him for guidance to literary success :

“ I have been laid up with a severe attack of asthma ” (he wrote), “ and have been unable to answer your letter before this. I return you your MS., as you desire, and would advise you to prune it down a little, and send it to either *Time* or *Longman's*. It is better than many magazine articles, though, if you will allow me to say so, it is rather belligerent in tone.

“ As regards your prospects in literature, believe me that it is impossible to live by literature. By journalism, a man may make an income, but rarely by pure literary work.

“ I would strongly advise you to try and make some profession, such as that of a tutor, the basis and mainstay of your life, and to keep

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literature for your finest, rarest moments. The best work in literature is always done by those who do not depend upon it for their daily bread and the highest form of literature, poetry, brings no wealth to the singer. For producing your best work also you will require some leisure and freedom from sordid care.

“ It is always a difficult thing to give advice, but as you are younger than I am, I venture to do so. Make some sacrifice for your art and you will be repaid, but ask of Art to sacrifice herself for you, and a bitter disappointment may come to you. I hope it will not, but there is always a terrible chance.

“ With your education you should have no difficulty in getting some post which should enable you to live without anxiety and to keep for literature your most felicitous moods. To attain this end, you should be ready to give up some of your natural pride; but loving literature as you do, I cannot think that you would not do so.

“ Finally, remember that London is full of young men working for literary success, and that you must carve your way to fame.

“ Laurels don't come for the asking.

“ Yours, OSCAR WILDE.”

With letters like these and often by direct

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exertion he helped scores of men and women. I remember one prominent dramatist, to whom he opened his successful career by guaranteeing the expenses of a trial *matinée* of his first play. If the play had failed Oscar Wilde would have been two or three hundred pounds out of pocket. It succeeded, and the young author was launched. Like nearly everyone whom Wilde had helped with counsel or direct assistance of person or purse, he was one of those who spoke most bitterly against him when the *débâcle* came. He was heard to say that he trusted "the wretch would get twenty years' penal servitude."

Poor Oscar Wilde had a capacity for making enemies because, when there was a *bon mot* to be turned, he did not stop to consider how the person against whom it was directed would appreciate or condone its sting. From the very first days of my acquaintance I noticed this habit of his, of saying bitter things about people, just, perhaps, witty, always, but such as his victims would remember rancorously. There had been, at the dinner at which I first met him, the son of a famous *pianiste*, and when I mentioned this fact to him he remarked: "Well, I am glad to see that he has managed to survive it." And this is only one of the remarks of that nature which I heard him utter.

CHAPTER XVII

Oscar Wilde no Reader—His Way with Newspapers—His Knowledge of the News—Mrs Langtry's Jewels—His Daily Paper in Gaol—A Surprise Visit from the Governor—A Terrible Suspense—The Warder and the Weeklies—Wilde on Meredith—Meredith on Wilde—Swinburne and Wilde—Swinburne and Myself—The Way of the World—A "Well-pretending Friendship"—Wilde and Sarah Bernhardt—The Offer of *Salomé*—A Warning disregarded—What Sarah lost—The Writing of *The Sphinx*.

I NEVER understood how Oscar Wilde kept up his scholarship and lived in touch with the literary progress of his time. I hardly ever saw him reading anything beyond a newspaper. Newspapers he disposed of very quickly. The paper would be snatched up, glanced over, rapidly mastered and thrown to the ground after a tiny strip had been torn off an edge, rolled into a pellet, and put into his mouth. I have seen *Le Figaro* thus disposed of in two minutes, less than the *temps de fumer une cigarette*; the bulkier British papers might take a little longer, but not much. Yet there was nothing in any paper that had thus passed through his hands which had escaped his attention—nothing of any importance, that is to say. And curiously enough, even when he was in gaol,

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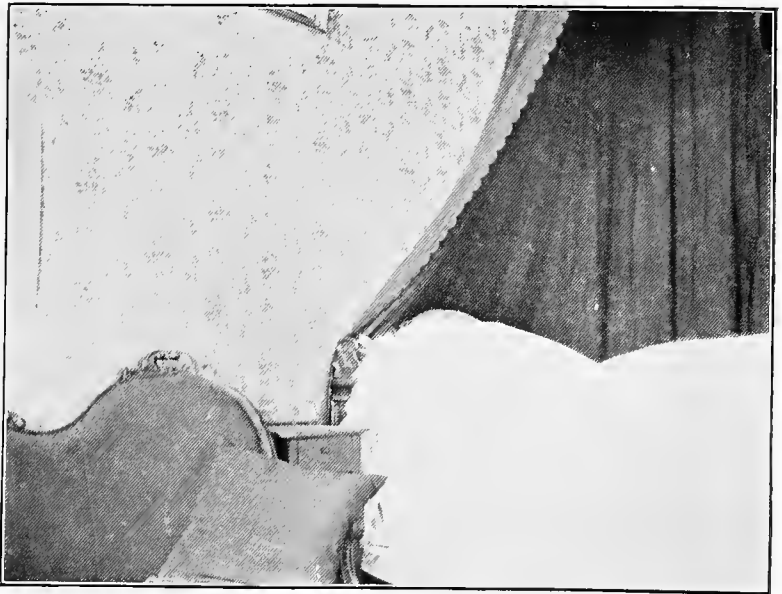
he seemed quite *au courant* with what was going on outside. On one occasion when I visited him, with a special order from the Home Secretary, at Wandsworth Prison, I mentioned that that morning the news had been made public that Mrs Langtry's jewels had been stolen from some bank. He knew all about it, and was commenting on the matter when the warder interrupted and said that we were to restrict our conversation to "business." How he acquired his information at Wandsworth I do not know, for I never spoke with him about his prison life.

At Reading Gaol, as we now know, he was regularly supplied by one of the warders with a morning paper daily, and with a certain number of literary weeklies also. During the last two or three months of his stay in Reading Gaol, Oscar Wilde read his *Daily Chronicle* regularly. But the manner of his reading was not that of the old days. He read slowly, holding the paper up to the light and standing up to do so. "He read every line in his paper, and I am not sure that he did not peruse the advertisements too."

One day, *horresco referens*, while he was absorbed in his *Daily Chronicle*, he heard steps outside his door. He had barely had the time to fold the newspaper up into some sort of small



READING GAOL.



OSCAR WILDE'S BED IN THE HOTEL D'ALSACE, PARIS.

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packet, and to thrust it behind him on the little trestle-table at which he worked, when a key snarled in the lock of the door of his cell. It was thrown open, and Major Nelson entered on one of his frequent visits to his distinguished prisoner. Oscar Wilde, drawn up at attention, stood masking with his body the table on which lay the folded paper. His anxiety must have been tremendous, for here was a grave offence on his part, and on the part of the person who had supplied him with the paper (not for pay but from friendship) a far graver one, as serious a breach of prison regulations as can well be conceived. For Oscar Wilde, discovery meant the loss of Major Nelson's confidence, and of all the little privileges which had been granted him; for the purveyor, it meant ruin and possibly imprisonment. The interview was a longer one than usual, the Major's solicitude for his prisoner prompting him to ask him several kindly questions, heaping as many coals of fire on Oscar Wilde's head. And all the while the *Chronicle* was there in full view, had the governor happened to glance at the little table on which *De Profundis* was being written. Fortune, however, favoured the audacious, and Major Nelson eventually retired without having detected the gross breach of prison regulations which had been

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committed. Nor did this narrow escape teach the "accomplices" anything, for the one kept bringing and the other kept reading the morning paper, every day until Wilde left prison. "To give him *The Chronicle* to read," said the purveyor, "was easy enough, as I had it delivered to me at the prison, but what gave me a lot of trouble was getting him the weeklies that he wanted, because I could not have those sent to the prison, as that would have attracted attention. Prison warders don't read *Spectators* and *Saturday Reviews*. I had to go out into the town to fetch them, and was often anxious lest my absence might be noticed; and then there was always the risk of my being questioned as to what I had been to fetch and what it was for."

He had few, if any, books with him in Paris; he seemed to know his favourite authors by heart. Meredith, for instance, he had a great admiration for. Who has forgotten his curious criticism of Meredith, which he puts into the mouth of Vivian in his essay, *The Decay of Lying*; as to which criticism the layman may well be excused if he remain ignorant whether it is intended to be favourable or the reverse?

"Ah, Meredith! Who can define him? His style is chaos, illuminated by flashes of lightning.

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As a writer he has mastered everything except language ; as a novelist he can do everything except tell a story ; as an artist he is everything except articulate. Somebody in Shakespeare—Touchstone, I think—talks about a man who is always breaking his shins over his own wit, and it seems to me that this might serve as a basis for a criticism of Meredith's method. But whatever he is, he is not a realist. Or rather I would say that he is a child of realism who is not on speaking terms with his father. By deliberate choice he has made himself a romanticist. He has refused to bow the knee to Baal, and after all, even if the man's fine spirit did not revolt against the noisy assertions of realism, his style would be quite sufficient of itself to keep life at a respectful distance."

He frequently quoted Meredith to me. I think one of his favourite passages was one in *The Egoist*, where someone sees himself mirrored in someone else's eyes, sees his own reflection and hugs it. He quoted Meredith to me frequently, and I gathered that he considered him the foremost British novelist, but I never saw a volume of Meredith in his hands nor any copies of the novelist's works in any house where he lived. Meredith, I think, did not largely reciprocate

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Wilde's admiration. I met him, for the first time, just after Wilde's conviction, and, in company with Henry James, had a long drive with him. He was monologuing most of the time, and mainly about Wilde. He seemed to be sorry for his fate, but expressed, as far as I remember, no particular sympathy with him and certainly said nothing to indicate that the cutting short of Oscar Wilde's career was a cruel blow to British literature. He had found the words, "carnal insanity," to explain Wilde's aberration, and seemed to like the expression, for he frequently repeated it. It was useless to attempt to lead him to say this or that, for he had a convenient deafness which enabled him to ignore any questions and to monopolise the conversation with a soliloquial exposition of his own views.

Swinburne was another writer for whom Oscar Wilde had a very great admiration and who had none at all for Oscar Wilde. When I first met Oscar Wilde in Paris, he was always talking about Swinburne, and he told me that it was the fact that as a young undergraduate at Oxford Swinburne had had the run of Monckton-Milnes's library, and had dipped deeply into the arcana of that gentleman's collection, that had set his mind on the subjects which so shocked

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the Poet Laureate. He also told me a story of a banquet at this nobleman's country house, where the lampadaries were female and nude, and he asserted that Swinburne's concupiscence was purely cerebral and for the very excellent reason that a riding accident had put the poet out of any lists but those of fancy. Two or three years after Oscar Wilde's death I received a letter—apropos of what I forget—from The Pines, Putney, from Watts-Dunton. All I knew about the writer was that he was an author and that he lived with Swinburne, for whom I had then, as I have now, an intense admiration, amounting almost to worship. I was accordingly delighted when, after an exchange of several letters with *le nommé* Watts-Dunton, the latter informed me that Swinburne meant to do himself "the pleasure" of writing to me in person. I was vastly pleased at the honour and distinction which were to be bestowed upon me, and in answering Watts-Dunton's letter, I told him how proud a letter from Swinburne would make me. I mentioned, among other things, that it was Oscar Wilde who had first drawn my attention to the wonderful beauties of his friend's poetry, and I added that I was even then engaged on a small book relating the story of my friendship with Oscar Wilde. And that

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letter closed hermetically the correspondence between The Pines, Putney Hill, and the Villa — at Paramé. As I received no answer from Watts-Dunton, nor the promised letter from Swinburne, I wrote again, but never a word came across the sea. In the end it dawned upon me that my statement that Wilde had been my friend, and that his memory was still cherished by me, had horrified the virtuous and liberal-minded academe of Putney Hill, so that I was to be cut off from all communion with them. I was rather amused, because, from the point of view of Mrs Grundy, Swinburne ranks as a poet of the most corrupting influence. I remember losing the *entrée* to a good house in the West End because I mentioned casually at dinner there that I was a great admirer of Swinburne, and certainly many of Swinburne's poems are not what one would like one's sons and daughters to read. And again, it could not be because Wilde had outraged the secular law, or was supposed to have done so, that Swinburne had such abhorrence for him, for one of the strong appeals that Swinburne always made to "us youth" was that he was an anarchist, living in defiance of the law, secular or divine.

I was sorry not to get Swinburne's letter, but by that time I had grown accustomed to all

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kinds of slights, snubs, set-backs, losses, and so forth, because of my friendship for Wilde, and because I never concealed it. I do not care twopence one way or the other about it, and as for public opinion, having spent most of my life in manufacturing it, I have that contempt for it which most manufacturers have for the goods they turn out. The fact remains that, because, in the year of Wilde's downfall, I did not care

revile me in the old days for sticking to my friend—forcing me even to legal action to defend my attitude—now that it is an honour and a distinction to have been Wilde's friend, say and write that in speaking of my friendship for Wilde I am arrogating to myself what never existed except in my imagination. Not many months ago, in a publication called *The Tatler*, there was a reference to my "well-pretending" friendship with Wilde, in an article written, no doubt, by

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one of those persons in Fleet Street who, after Ernest Dowson's death in my cottage, circulated the rumour that I "had done very well out of

Robert Harbrough
Shenan

in memory of an
old and noble
friendship:

Ernest Dowson

Oscar Wilde

Facsimile of the Title-page of the copy of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* which Oscar Wilde sent to the author

Ernest Dowson." Just to nail that particular lie—with reference to my friendship with Wilde—to the counter, and to give the persons referred to no further excuse for the exercise of their

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spleen, I reproduce in these pages two facsimiles, one being the title-page of the copy of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which Oscar Wilde sent me, and the other a letter from Mrs Oscar Wilde, in which she says that I am the only friend that her husband cared to see in gaol. It may be remarked, *en passant*, that if our efforts to bring Oscar Wilde back to repute and honour had failed, these very people (like the writer of the article above referred to) would never have missed an opportunity of charging me with *having* been Wilde's friend. In doing this I should have considered that they were conferring upon me an honour and a tribute, but such would not have been their intention.

From the very first day of our meeting in Paris, Wilde said that we must become great friends, and he certainly behaved towards me in the friendliest way. He gave up much of his time to be in my company, in which he seemed to take pleasure, and neglected, on my behalf, many acquaintances which might have been useful to him. He was glad to take me anywhere and to introduce me to anybody that he knew, and it was by him that I was first presented to Sarah Bernhardt. It was also by him, or rather through him, that I saw Sarah Bernhardt for the last time in this world, unless

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hazard should ever bring me into her presence again. Wilde introduced me to her at the Vaudeville Theatre, and the first sight I got of Phèdre was bare-footed and in her *chemise*, peeping out from her dressing-room into the little parlour which formed part of her *loge*. She spoke in a very friendly way to *mon cher Oscar* and seemed as delighted to see him as Jean Richepin, who was in the parlour referred to, and who, with folded arms and the scowl of an Othello, appeared horribly jealous of any male that approached the divine Sarah, most emphatically did not. Wilde afterwards told me that the reason Sarah and he were such good friends was that when she first came to London he was able to render her various little services in stageland, and in the Press, and "you see, Robert, I never made love to her. As a matter of fact, at that time, I was dreadfully in love with another and more beautiful actress." Sarah often said that what had so pleased her about Oscar Wilde was that he had not courted her, who hated being courted, had no use for enamoured men, even of the highest rank, and liked for once in a while to meet a man who treated her as a fellow-artist, as a comrade, which was what Oscar Wilde had done.

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In my little book, *The Story of an Unhappy Friendship*, I have related at length how Sarah Bernhardt behaved to Wilde, and (casually remarked) to myself, when he was in prison, how I went, at his bidding, to offer to sell her the copyright of *Salomé* for four hundred pounds, how she wept and wrung her hands, how she finally promised to "see what she could do" and thereafter spent her time in avoiding me, who enthusiastically had telegraphed to Wilde, who was in Holloway and who was in desperate straits for money wherewith to provide for his defence, that Sarah was coming to the rescue. She kept me on the run for several days, having me put off with various excuses day after day. Finally she sent me word that she would write me, and though that is twenty years ago, I am still waiting for her communication. It occurred to me afterwards that if I had only kept my eyes open during that first interview with her on the subject, I could have spared Oscar Wilde a great disappointment and myself a number of very humiliating calls at the house in the Boulevard Pereire. I had been, as usual, received by Sarah in her studio, which was lined with cages of animals and birds, and just behind Sarah, as she sat by my side, wringing her hands and dabbing her eyes over the sad fate of *ce cher*

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Oscar, si bon, si doux, a large, obscene ape, with a multi-coloured posterior, was disporting itself, as I thought, after its kind. Since then, and thinking the matter over, I have come to the conclusion that that friendly ape was trying by its gestures and grimaces to warn me against believing anything that the actress was telling me, to disbelieve her expressions of sorrow and sympathy for my friend, and to place no reliance whatever on her promises. The beast certainly did everything he could to cast ridicule on the pathetic scene which was being enacted by Sarah for my especial benefit. He stuck out his tongue, he winked a deliberate eye, he smacked his posterior, as he turned it upon us, as though to draw my attention to its many iridescent hues. As the Americans say, he was trying to "wise" me, and I daresay, if he could have spoken, he would have said: "Well, if you think that Madame will risk a centime of her money on a friend who has fallen into hopeless ruin and disgrace, you must be a bigger fool than you look." I did not understand the simian warning, and the result was a great deal of annoyance, and no doubt, to Oscar, a "very bitter experience in a life which thereafter was to be a bitter one"—to paraphrase a subsequent remark of his, quoted by Arthur Ransome. I say, "no doubt,"

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because, beyond the remark, " Sarah is hopeless, I fear," in the letter he wrote to me from Holloway, he never once referred to the matter afterwards. He never said a word in reproach of her conduct, but took it as philosophically as he took all the blows that Fate levelled at him. As things have turned out, it was, of course, extremely fortunate for the Wilde estate and family that Sarah, after giving me her formal promise, did not keep her word. She would have acquired, for three or four hundred pounds, a piece of literary and dramatic property worth, *au bas mot*, two hundred times either amount, and with that tremendous profit the satisfactory feeling of having done a kind action. I do not know whether Oscar Wilde ever saw Sarah again after his return to Paris, for he never mentioned her name. I doubt it, however. He was very sensitive about his disgrace, and would not go counter to any possibility of a slight.

After *The Duchess of Padua* had been dispatched on her luckless journey to California, Oscar Wilde turned to the writing of *The Sphinx*. When I first fixed the date when he wrote this poem, Wilde scholiasts contested my accuracy—and tried to establish that it was composed many years previously—namely, during his days

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at Oxford (1874-1878)—and that because it contains certain lines transferred from the Newdigate Prize Poem, *Ravenna*:

“ I have scarcely seen
Some twenty summers cast their green for autumn’s
gaudy liveries.”

I do not deny that it is quite possible that Oscar Wilde may at Oxford have commenced some poem, parts of which he may have used when he came to write *The Sphinx*, in Paris, but he certainly never told me so and gave me the impression that it was a fresh *opus* on which he was engaged. And there is no doubt that what originally suggested this poem to him was a poem by one of the French writers—Baudelaire, I think it was—whom he had particularly studied during his Parisian days in 1883. This poem begins with some lines describing how in the poet’s apartment, as in his heart, a monstrous cat *se promène*. Was Oscar Wilde reading Baudelaire at Oxford? I don’t think so, and it certainly was Baudelaire who suggested *The Sphinx*. Anyhow, I saw and heard him composing the poem and, as I have related elsewhere, to the amusement of Alfred Douglas, I helped Wilde with a rhyme or two which he used in it. Stuart Mason, in his admirable *Bibliography*, a book indispensable to Wilde

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students, gives, on page 396, a reduced facsimile of a page of the manuscript of *The Sphinx* which

Follow some roving lions' spoor
across the copper-coloured plain,
Reach out, and hale him by the mane,
and make him be your paramour!

Couch by his side upon the grass,
~~and when he~~



THE SPHINX

Reduced facsimile of Manuscript

he thinks seems to bear out the fact "that portions of this poem were written as early as the author's Oxford days" and that because this

gymnosophist

ack

g. Falch (ion?),
alk

orechthelch
catapalque
talc

{ bronze
Swans

Tragelaphos
Chamaeleon.

stebb
{ hieroglyph
hipposyph
glyph (light)

phit
Colossal,
phantasmal,

labrinth }
hyacinth }
plinth.

manche

==

odorous
Antinous.

Ethiops

slope

with thebs of polished ebony
Antinous of ebony

THE SPHINX

Reduced facsimile of Manuscript

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page was one on which Wilde, exercising his talents as a caricaturist, had drawn a couple of comic dons. The verse written on this page, however, begins: "Follow some roving lion's *boor*," and the word I have italicised, "*spoor*," was not in Wilde's Oxford days one that was known or used in England. It is a Dutch word which came to us, with many other Boer words, much later. And with regard to dons, who are usually comic, they lend themselves to caricature anywhere and at any time. However, thanks to Mr Ross, my version of the history of *The Sphinx* is the one on permanent record at the British Museum. In 1909 Robert Ross presented the manuscript of this poem, which had been given to him by C. Ricketts, to the British Museum, where, according to Stuart Mason, it is catalogued amongst the additional manuscripts as: "37942. 'THE SPHINX,' a poem written at Paris in 1883 (Sherard, *Life of Oscar Wilde*, 1906, p. 238)." An incomplete manuscript of this poem and a typewritten draft of the same, with manuscript corrections by the author, were sold at Sotheby's on 27th July 1911, for £143 to Bernard Quaritch. On several pages of the above manuscript there are notes for rhymes, which reminds me to put on record that Wilde, much to my astonishment, told me that he

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considered a rhyming dictionary a very useful accessory to the lyre. I had thought that true poets never used such a book, but then I was young at the time.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE Oscar Wilde of 1883—His great *Lebensglæde*—His Great Kindness—Oscar Wilde as a Business Reference—A Meeting at Clapham Junction—Twelve Years later—The British *Lascivia di Sangue*—Travelling Third Class—Charles Street, Grosvenor Square—Oscar's Landlord and landlady—Dining with Whistler—Days of Impecuniosity—A Visit to the Police Court—Lecture at the Prince's Hall—Veziñ as a Coach—Oscar's Letter to Veziñ—Veziñ's Regard for Oscar Wilde—Anecdotes about Oscar—Why of Doubtful Authenticity—The *Vanity Fair* Caricature—The Name of Mr Hopper—Reading *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

THE Oscar Wilde, then, whom I first met in Paris in 1883, was a marvellous young man, enthusiastic, ambitious, kindly, generous, brilliantly clever, devoted to the arts, hard-working and conscientious at his craft, a delightful conversationalist, liberal-minded, benign, a thorough good sport and an aristocrat in every fibre of him. And what particularly delighted me in him, apart from his entire lack of affectation of any kind, was his exceeding and exuberant joy of life, his *Lebensglæde*, as Ibsen calls it. Though he appeared to take pleasure in reading morbid and pessimistic authors, he himself simply hugged the enjoyments of life, and I ever think of the stimulating picture that dear Oscar

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used to present when, dinner or a course being over, he would pull out his silver cigarette-case, slap it down on the table and prepare for the fist inter-, or post-prandial smoke. He was tolerant and without rancour, as witness his behaviour when he was disappointed by Mary Anderson. And that he was generous and reckless o' his money where his friends were concerned, I have already shown, by relating how he came to my rescue with a proffered loan of money when it was urgent for me to leave for London. Apart from that I remember that, being very interested in the life of Gerard de Nerval, he surprised me one day with the present of a very rare little brochure about this melancholy poet, the Delvau brochure, if I am not mistaken, for which he had hunted all the bookshops on the Quai Voltaire, and for which, the *Duchess* having turned him down at that time, he paid far more than he could afford.

That he was very hard up when he came back to London and before he secured his engagement to lecture in the provinces was shown me by the fact that, I being at Ambleside at the time, he wrote me, asking if I could receive him as a guest for some weeks.

I remember also that at this time, being anxious to get some ties of the colours that Oscar

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Wilde affected, or had been used to affect, ties of the so-called "æsthetic shades," I wrote to Liberty's asking for a selection to be sent me to choose from. To obtain such a consignment, it was necessary, by the rules of the firm, to give a London reference, and having mentioned Oscar Wilde's name, he being the Gaudissart of Liberty's æsthetic truck, I had every reason to expect the goods to be sent. I received neither selection of ties nor any explanation as to the reason for their not being dispatched, and I could only conclude that my reference was not considered a satisfactory one.

After I left the Lakes I went to London, and one day, by hazard, met my friend again at—of all places—Clapham Junction, that railway station which, some years later, was to be the scene of the hideous outrage to which he was there subjected, while waiting, manacled and in prison garb, for the train by which he was to be conveyed to Reading Gaol, and which he describes in the following passage in *De Profundis*:—

"Everything about my tragedy has been hideous, mean, repellent, lacking in style; our very dress makes us grotesque. We are the zanies of sorrow. We are the clowns whose hearts are broken. We are specially designed

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to appeal to the sense of humour. On November 13th, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock till half-past two that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction, in convict dress and handcuffed, for the world to look at. I had been taken out of the hospital ward without a moment's notice being given to me. Of all possible objects I was the most grotesque. When people saw me they laughed. Each train as it came up swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half-an-hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year after that was done to me, I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time."

I had heard of this outrage shortly after it happened and was informed indeed that the occurrence was even worse than what Wilde relates. I was told that the man who first recognised the prisoner shouted: "By God, that is Oscar Wilde," and spat on him. I published the story in the hopes that some of those who were present might read my comments. The

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fact was denied then, but *De Profundis* confirmed it. I have more than once in England witnessed the delight of the Anglo-Saxon *plebs* in contemplating the shame and humiliation of prisoners, pilloried, by our clumsy prison arrangements, in public places, and attribute it less to ignorance than to a kind of bloodthirstiness, which is characteristic of our race, a *lascivia di sangue* which perhaps alone the Marquess de Sade could have explained.

However, that morning in 1883 we were very far from anticipating to what a shameful tragedy the platform where we met by chance was within twelve years to be the stage. He was in high spirits, asked me to lunch with him, and rode up to town with me in a third-class carriage, a condition of travelling to which he was certainly not accustomed. I mentioned to him, apropos of this, that a great Belgian nobleman, the Duc de Ligne, on being asked why he travelled third class, answered: "Because there are no fourth classes in Belgium." This led to a reference to our common impecuniosity and to the murderer Lacenaire's "horror of the empty pocket." If I remember rightly, my position at that time was a very bad one. I was to leave the house where I had been staying as a guest on the morrow, and hardly knew where to go, for

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my only tangible asset was the manuscript of a translation from Tourgenieff. When Oscar heard this he at once invited me to come and share rooms with him at his lodgings in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square. He had signed a contract, he told me, for a lecturing tour in London and the provinces, and could at least give me shelter until I had found something to do.

Wilde's rooms in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square, were in a house on the right-hand side as one goes towards the square, and opposite the Coburg Mews. The street has been re-named and is now Carlos Street. The house, which was an old-fashioned one, has now been pulled down, and a modern building stands in its place. The lodgings, which were for single gentlemen of distinction, were kept by a Mr and Mrs Davis. They were most excellent people, the kind of landlord and landlady that one so very rarely meets in the dreary Sahara of London Lodgingdom. Mr Davis had been a butler in good families; his wife had been a cook, and a real *cordons-bleus* she was. Mr Davis used to go out to banquets in the city to superintend the waiting, and had a standing arrangement with the Governors of the Bank of England. They were both devoted to Oscar Wilde, though he was often in their debt, and could not speak

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too highly of his cleverness, kindness and consideration. And he it remarked, *en passant*, that anybody who was ever in Wilde's service, either directly or indirectly, had this same feeling for him. " Bless his sweet face, he was the kindest gentleman that ever lived " is the recorded remark of a woman who was for some long time cook at his house in Tite Street. In his case, as in that of most men, his kindness was misinterpreted by some as a sign of weakness, by others as being dictated by some base motive. I remember how pathetically Oscar Wilde, at the time of his trial, having told me that he had seen in the purlieus of the Court a number of the wretched lads who gave evidence against him, exclaimed to me : " And they have nothing against me, Robert, except that I was kind to them."

Oscar's rooms were on the top floor, an oak-panelled sitting-room, with a small bedroom opening out of it. When Oscar was at home, I used to sleep in a bedroom on the ground floor, when he was *en voyage* I was allowed to use his bedroom. I remember that the bed was no sybaritic couch ; it was a particularly hard camp bedstead, and reminded me of those we had at Oxford. There was no bathroom in the house, an inconvenience which troubled Oscar Wilde

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but little. He was not addicted to the daily bath. At the same time he had a veritable *cultus* for his body, and took great pride in his personal appearance. Douglas relates how much time he used to spend every day in brushing his beautiful hair. On his arrival in Paris, his first visit was always *chez le coiffeur*. I do not think he ever shaved himself, at least, I never saw him do so, yet I never saw him, as a free man, the least untidy about the face, so I suppose that in London he visited the barber daily, for, like his brother, he had a strong growth of face hair. I remember once seeing him with a beard and whiskers, which the poor fellow tried to hide from me, by holding his check blue-and-white handkerchief before his face. That was on one of the occasions on which I visited him in Reading Gaol. His custom of having his hair curled dated from his adoption of a Neronian coiffure. As a matter of fact, the curls were at once combed out, an agreeable waviness alone remaining. He was fond of his body, he used to stroke and pet himself. When he was reading he was usually seen to be caressing his nose or gently pulling his ear. Sometimes with his nail he would scrape off some piece of dead skin, which he would roll up, afterwards contemplating the pellet — which had been part of

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himself—with admiring interest. I remember how once, when a new overcoat was delivered to him in Paris, and he had put it on, he manifested quite a childish pleasure in the comfort it gave him. “So warm, Robert,” he said, folding his hands across his breast like a child.

The arrangements at the lodgings in Charles Street were distinguished and comfortable. Our newspapers were invariably aired before they were brought, with the early cup of tea, to our bedsides. The valeting was what one is accustomed to in the best houses. As to the catering, it was incomparably the best I have ever met with in any lodgings. We used to *déjeuner* in the French fashion about eleven o'clock, and it was as good a breakfast-lunch as any that could be got anywhere in London. The Davises had some excellent claret, and the coffee that Mrs Davis made reminded one of the *café noir* that used to be served at the “not at all bad little place in the Avenue de l'Opéra” where we used to dine with the Duchess. Apropos of whom I remember that, very shortly after I came to live at Charles Street, I one morning found Oscar Wilde talking with Johnston Forbes-Robertson (now Sir Johnston), and I heard the actor, who was holding a roll of manuscript in his hand, say : “Very well, Oscar. I will take it round to the

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printer's at once." This was the manuscript of *The Duchess of Padua*. I imagine that it was then that the twenty copies "privately printed as Manuscript," to which reference has been made, and which were marked "Op. II.," were produced.

We generally dined *en ville*. Oscar was usually invited out; I dined where I could, not infrequently with Duke Humphrey. Sometimes we went to the Café Royal, and on more than one occasion Whistler was with us. He was not very prosperous in those days, and used to order the very cheapest claret to take with his frugal grill. Oscar Wilde showed him the greatest deference. "Like the grand Virginian gentleman that you are," he sometimes said to him. Whistler seemed to me always to be nurturing a grievance, either against some individual or against the social collectivity. I remember once saying to Oscar that the pre-prandial conversation with Whistler was an excellent substitute for bitters as an *apéritif*, and so indeed it was. His remarks were the cascara sagrada of conversation. I was promptly snubbed by Oscar for my observation. "One does not criticise a James McNeill Whistler," he said, though later on he himself was to criticise him, and not without acerbity.

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There were some days on which I might have signed myself, like Dr Johnson, *impransus*. And there was at least one day when, if he had not had an invitation to dine out, Wilde might have done the same. I shall not forget with what an air of self-reproach, and even of guilt, the good fellow, knowing my position, hurried out of the room that night. In those days he was making use of pawnshops, the bankers of the poor, and once he asked me to accompany him to Marlborough Street Police Court, where he was to swear an affidavit regarding a pawn-ticket which he had lost. I believe the pledge in question was the gold medal, the Berkeley Gold Medal, which he had won at Trinity College, Dublin. This medal seems to have lain with the pawnbrokers most of the time, for it was in pledge when he died, and the amount of the loan being a considerable one, and more than Ross, with all the other charges on him, could afford to pay, it was not redeemed, and doubtless has long since gone into the melting-pot.

I was present at the first lecture that Oscar Wilde gave in London at the Prince's Hall. The attendance was a fair one, and most of his points were appreciated. His manner was supremely easy; he dominated his audience. He seemed to realise that what he was saying was both new

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and interesting, and that it was for his listeners to appreciate that fact and feel pleased and proud at being lectured to by him. His attitude was that of the Roman actor who at the end of the play used suddenly to realise the existence of an audience, address them directly and, with a peremptory "*Vos plaudite,*" leave the stage.

I understood that he had been carefully coached in his stage manner and deportment, and that by no less an actor than Mr Hermann Vezin. Vezin used to relate that one day, shortly before the lecture tour, Oscar Wilde called on him and "Vezin," he said, "I am to go lecturing in England. I want you to help me. I want a natural style, with a touch of affectation." "Well," answered Vezin, "and haven't you got that, Oscar?"

Vezin added that Oscar did not like that remark of his, and seemed to think that he was making fun of him. Wilde had a very high opinion of Vezin's quality as an actor, which is shown in the following letter which he wrote him, and of which I reproduce a facsimile in these pages. Vezin, who gave this letter to the lady who has lent it to me for the purposes of this book, pencilled upon it the approximate date of its reception, 4th October 1880. It is

To the Street.
Chelsea

Hermann Veizin

I saw you &
copy of my Diana
which you was kind
enough to loan me
read some months
ago any suggestions
about situations, or
dialogue I showed
me so glad to get
from such an

it seems to be the
most perfect example
I have ever seen
of that right realism
which is founded on
consummate art,
and sustained by
consummate genius. The
man Iago walked
and talked before
us two points
particular and
detailed me -

experimental nature
as yourself: I have
just found out
that a difficult
except play writing
is.

Will you
let me tell you
that immense
pleasure you
Iago gave me -

the manner, character
you gave to otherwise
trivial details: a cue
and splendid art, to
make all common
things symbolic of the
leading idea, as Albat
Durer loves to do in
his drawings - the
other is your delivery
of asides - notably in
act II: I never knew
how they ought to be
ever before - but perhaps
you are doing in an
aside now, "Oho, I am
so, I believe
sets - you fit it
Oscar Wilde"

Facsimile of Letter from Oscar Wilde to Hermann Veizin

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dated from Tite Street, where Wilde was then sharing rooms with an artist friend.

This is the letter :

“ TITE STREET,
“ CHELSEA.

“ MY DEAR VEZIN,—I send you a copy of my drama,¹ which you were kind enough to hear me read some months ago, any suggestion about situations or dialogue I should be so glad to get from such an experienced artist as yourself. I have just found out what a difficult craft play-writing is.

“ Will you let me tell you what immense pleasure your *Iago* gave me—it seems to me the most perfect example I have seen of that right realism which is founded on consummate art and sustained by consummate genius. The man *Iago* walked and talked before us : two points particularly delighted me—the enormous *character* you gave to otherwise trivial *details* : a rare and splendid art, to make all common things *symbolic* of the leading idea, as Albert Durer loved to do in his drawings—the other is your delivery of asides—notably in Act II. : I never knew how they ought to be quite before—but perhaps you are saying in an aside now

A copy of the first edition of *Vera*.

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' Ohe jam satis '—so believe me, your friend and admirer

“ OSCAR WILDE.”

Veizin had a strong affection for Wilde. The last time I saw this fine actor, to whom his contemporaries never did full justice, was at Lady Wilde's house in Oakley Street, during the last trial. Oscar was too ill and tired to come downstairs, where a number of his friends had collected that evening to wish him luck. I do not know that Veizin, with whom, that night, I had a long conversation about our friend, ever saw him again. When he talked about Oscar he used to relate how fascinated a niece of his, a young girl of seventeen, over from America, had been with the poet, who had sat next to her at a dinner-party. “ She was simply delighted with him,” he used to say. “ He sat next to her, and all through dinner devoted himself to her amusement. He told her stories, he made jokes, he was amiable and kind, and the girl went away in enthusiasm for him.” Oscar had the special gift of making himself beloved by young people, and especially girls, and there are many stories on record in this connection. That he ever tried to score off a girl with a caustic saying, I disbelieve, and I never credited the story that

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keeps cropping up about him and a Miss Smith. "I can remember your name very well," he is alleged to have said to this young lady, who had claimed a previous acquaintance with him, "but I certainly cannot recall your face." That is the very thing that Oscar Wilde would never have said, for his nature was free from vulgarity, and he hated to hurt a person's feelings. He certainly was caustic in remarks he made about people when discussing them out of their hearing, but I do not think that I ever heard him say an unkind thing to anybody. As to ridiculing a person's name—as he is alleged to have done in this Smith anecdote—it is the very last thing he would have done. I once heard him rebuke a man who had told him that, having been dunned by a solicitor of the name of Cheese, he had written to him to say that any kind of conduct might be expected from a man with such a cognomen. "That was a very vulgar thing to do," said Oscar; "a man cannot help his name."

One frequently reads stories about Wilde which to those who knew him are obviously neither true nor cleverly invented. I have always disbelieved the following two anecdotes, which appear now and again in the Press and are probably quoted by someone who thinks

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that they do credit to Oscar Wilde's wit and power of repartee.

These are the anecdotes :

“ One episode in connection with Wilde I remember well. He was chatting after lunch in a circle of both sexes, and a very beautiful and fascinating woman, whose name is a household word, kept nagging at him on the question of original sin, a subject she might well have fought shy of, considering her own Poppæan record. ‘ Sin began with Adam and came down to you, Oscar,’ she said, and he turned upon her like a greyhound on a hare: ‘ No,’ he murmured, in his silkiest tones, ‘ sin commenced with Eve ; Cleopatra carried it on, and, my dear ——, the future of sin may, I think, be safely left in your hands.’ She never forgave him.

“ On another occasion a bishop dining at the same table said, in a blustering, overbearing manner, to Oscar Wilde: ‘ Sir, I can't think, I really can't think as you do.’ ‘ So sorry, my lord,’ drawled Wilde; ‘ but why not ask the Creator to rectify his errors and give you something to think with.’ Then the bishop asked someone to pass him the nuts.”

As I have said, nobody who knew Oscar Wilde

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will believe either of these stories. He had no silky tones, he never drawled, and he certainly never was rude. But the strangest stories are current about him. I remember hearing a remarkably vulgar but wealthy woman once abusing Wilde, and she related that it was his habit in society to shout everybody else down, and that another disagreeable characteristic of his was that if anybody said anything "real smart" he used to *note it down on his cuff*, so as to record it for his own use on a future occasion.

Which reminds me that the man who had occupied Wilde's rooms in Charles Street before he went there to live was Pellegrini, the "Ape" of *Vanity Fair*, whose notable caricature of Oscar Wilde, never before republished, I am able to reproduce here. Mr Davis used to talk about him and relate that all Pellegrini's notes on a "subject" used to be pencilled on his shirt-cuff. "And every morning when I came in to take his clothes," said Davis, "Mr Pellegrini would shout out: 'On your life, Davis, leave my shirt alone. There's twenty pounds' worth of stuff on it.'"

The only instance I can remember where Wilde made play with a characteristic as to which the person in question might possibly have been sensitive, and accordingly where

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deliberately he might have hurt a man's feelings, was when he changed to "Mr Hopper" the name of one of his characters in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. He did this because the actor who had been selected to play the part in question had a peculiar walk, a kind of hop, so that the new name chosen described his mannerism.

The brother of this actor was present, by the way, when Oscar Wilde read this play to the company at the St James's Theatre, and relates :

"He had just crossed from Ireland that morning. His silk hat was ruffled and as he stepped on to the stage he stumbled. He put a large box of cigarettes on the table in front of him, and saying : ' May I smoke ? ' lit one and began to read. The company was not prepared to be impressed, but after the first sentences all listened in breathless silence to the close."

CHAPTER XIX

Lecturing in the Provinces—Wilde's Friendship with Edmund Yates—How it ended—A Conspiracy of Silence—The Anecdote about Lewis Morris — *Esprit d'escalier* — Ellen Terry on Whistler and Wilde—Her Great Loyalty to Wilde's Memory—Oscar Wilde's Study of German—Austin Harrison on Wilde's German Popularity—An Unjustified Statement—Contrary Evidence—Dr Max Meyerfeld and Oscar Wilde—The Book by an Unknown Author—An Unfortunate Dinner-table Remark—What it led to—Subsequent Booms in Germany—Dr Bendz on the Wilde "Boom"—Dr Strauss and *Salomé*.

I SPENT some weeks at the lodgings in Charles Street, during which time Oscar Wilde was mostly away lecturing in the provinces. He seemed to dislike the work, and rarely spoke about his experiences in the country. I fancy he felt rather humiliated by the necessity to do such work, for it was obvious, from the announcements of the lecture agents, that his personality and its notoriety, rather than the value or the interest of his discourses, were considered the attraction to the public. But money was very short and he just had to lend himself to the business. When he was resting at home, he seemed generally rather tired, wrote nothing and read very little. But his brain was working all the time, and his conversation was as brilliant

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as ever. I have heard him, cigarette in hand, lying in bed, suggest to his brother Willie Wilde the ideas for half-a-dozen stories for *The World*, to which Willie was a frequent contributor, all in the space of half-an-hour.

In those days Wilde was great friends with Edmund Yates, the editor and proprietor of *The World*. Yates had a considerable admiration for Wilde, and, cynical man of the world though he was, a real personal liking. He had contributed very largely, by his constant references to Oscar Wilde in his greatly read paper, to stimulate and maintain public curiosity and interest in the young Irishman of letters, and was, in short, Wilde's most effective advertising agent. He was more than this, he was Wilde's defender against Henry Labouchere, who had a grudge against Oscar, who was falsely reported to have said something derogatory about Henrietta Hodson in Chicago. Labouchere was constantly attacking Wilde in *Truth*, and, just after he had left Paris in 1883, brought out in that periodical a very offensive article, entitled *Exit Oscar*. Yates answered this attack in the next issue of *The World*, and said that if exit there were, it was at least a very brilliant one, proceeding to relate Wilde's triumphs in America and his social successes in Paris. For many

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years *The World* might be considered Wilde's official organ in London, and so continued until, in the year 1890, Wilde unfortunately quarrelled with Yates, who, being gouty and irritable, took offence at a note that Wilde had written him and sent him the following communication, which began with "Dear Oscar":—

"I had not noticed the paragraph until you drew my attention to it, and now that I have read it, I confess I do not think the statement deserves the harsh words you apply to it, or that I, in such dealings as we have had, have ever laid myself open to your excessively impertinent and offensive suggestions about 'reminiscences.' However, to prevent any further annoying intrusion, I have given orders that your name shall never again appear in *The World*."

The trouble was about a paragraph describing a party in which the words occurred: "The two Oscars, Wilde and Browning, vied with one another in retailing well-known anecdotes."

It was a pity that Oscar quarrelled with Yates, who was a man of very considerable influence, and who, in the early days of Oscar's journalistic struggles, had put a good deal of remunerative

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work in his way. Wilde had at least the satisfaction of remembering, when the split took place, that it was Yates and not he who had initiated their acquaintance. In his *Bibliography*, Stuart Mason quotes a letter written by Yates on 30th January 1879 to Willie Wilde, in which he says: "I wish you would put me *en rapport* with your brother, the Newdigate man, of whom I hear so much and so favourably."

In the midst of his triumph over the success of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde may have remembered Yates's caustic note and the editor's attempt to condemn his name to oblivion. It must have been pleasant for him to reflect that *The World* would now be forced to open its columns again to a discussion of his work, and that Yates was to be taught that "the Newdigate man" had been able to push his way to the front in spite of his desertion. Yates lived long enough to see his former protégé the most successful man of letters of his day, yet at the same time can have had no boding of the great height of universal recognition he was some years later, *per varios casus, per tot discrimina rerum*, to reach.

It was characteristic of Wilde that he never once spoke of his disagreement with Yates, never referred to the matter at all, never spoke bitterly

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of his former friend. He was the most discreet of men, yet at times, as his trial showed, the least so. Possibly in his heart of hearts he despised Yates, the journalist and inferior novelist, with his silly pretensions to represent the *haut ton* of London, his dubious Gallicisms and utter want of scholarship.

At about that time there was an attempt made in the London papers to organise against Wilde a conspiracy of silence. I remember being severely criticised in *Vanity Fair* for my constant references to Wilde in my newspaper contributions. The hope was expressed that at least I was being paid for these writings in "meal or malt." But such conspiracy naturally collapsed, though a few years later, the conspirators, that is to say, after Wilde's disgrace, thought that it could be triumphantly revived and for perpetuity. Wherein they again deluded themselves, as events have shown.

Apropos of conspiracies of silence, there is a frequently told anecdote that the poet, Lewis Morris, having complained to Oscar that there was a conspiracy of silence against him was promptly advised to join it. I never believed that Oscar Wilde would have said such a thing to a brother poet, because I never knew him wilfully to hurt anybody's feelings, and for

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another thing, this particular poet was an eminently well-meaning if tedious personage, insufficiently popular to excite anybody's hostility. That I was right in doubting the accuracy of this story was proved to me by the following statement made by Mr Augustine Birrell, the present Secretary for Ireland, in the course of a conversation he had with Mr Herbert Vivian, who was writing a series of interviews, or *Studies in Personality* for *The Pall Mall Magazine*.

Birrell had been talking about a conversation he had had with Winston Churchill and remarked that, in answer to something that Winston had said, "I scarcely knew what to say to him, but I was profoundly impressed by his manner and earnestness." Hereupon Vivian said: "I should not think that you often found yourself at a loss for an answer."

To this Birrell answered, with a smile: "That reminds me of a certain poet who came to me once upon a time and complained that his works were neglected. He said there was a conspiracy of silence. Of course I felt very sorry for him, but I was really puzzled what to say. I mentioned this to a well-known wit, who exclaimed quite angrily: 'You did not know what to say! Do you really mean to tell me

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that you did not know what to say?' 'No, upon my word I did not.' 'Of course, you should have said: "A conspiracy of silence! My dear fellow, join it at once."'"

Oscar seems here to have been quick in repartee. I think that for the most part the good things he said were elaborated after the event. He was eminently endowed with that form of wit which the French call *esprit d'escalier*, the clever things that come to one as one is going downstairs after an interview, the clever things one ought to have said at the moment. He used carefully to prepare the flashes which came suddenly and as *impromptus*. Sheridan had this habit also. In this respect Wilde differed from his one-time friend, Whistler, who indeed had the gift of instant repartee. Oscar was slower and more ponderous, and would ever be restrained by his great good nature, so that even if he had a smart *impromptu* to launch he would hesitate, for fear of wounding, and so lose the opportunity of making a conversational score. Whistler was small, alert and waspish, and liked to sting. I have often listened to the two men sparring with their tongues, and that was the impression I derived. For the rest they were both wonderful in their way, and it was, though perhaps at the time I did not realise it,

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a high privilege for me to be present at their discussions. To-day I am inclined to echo Ellen Terry's words about them. In the fascinating *Story of My Life*, she remarks: "The most remarkable men I have known were, without a doubt, Whistler and Oscar Wilde." She adds: "This does not imply that I liked them better or admired them more than the others, but there was something about both of them more instantaneously individual and audacious than it is possible to describe."

Ellen Terry has ever kept a warm place in her heart for poor Oscar. He had pleased her greatly with the sonnet he wrote about her impersonation of Queen Henrietta Maria, in his cousin Wills's play, *King Charles*, the sonnet beginning :

"In the lone tent, waiting for victory,
She stands with eyes marred by the mists of pain,
Like some wan lily overdrenched with rain."

"I was proud of my scene in the camp in the third act," she says, "when I found that it had inspired Oscar Wilde to write me this lovely sonnet. That phrase, 'wan lily,' represented perfectly what I had tried to convey, not only in this part, but in *Ophelia*. I hope that I thanked Oscar enough at the time. Now he is dead, and I cannot thank him any more. . . ."

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I shall always remember how kindly Ellen Terry spoke of my poor friend to me. It was on the first occasion on which I had the honour of speaking with her. I was introduced to her behind the scenes at the Prince of Wales's Theatre at Birmingham, in her dressing-room. After the usual remarks, I left her alone with my friends, who after my departure mentioned to her that I was the person who had written the story of my friendship with Wilde, adding as Dr Kiefer says in his preface to his translation of *Salomé*, published in Reclam's *Universal-Bibliothek*, that I was one of the few of his friends, etc., and that my book had certainly done not a little to remove the false judgments which had been passed on the poet. Whereupon Ellen Terry dashed out of her *loge* and after me, across the stage, calling me back, to talk of Wilde and to say many beautiful and kind things about him.

To think of a smart but unkind thing and not to say it for fear of hurting the feelings of the person addressed is, according to Lavater, a sign of the possession of the highest self-control and is the most self-sacrificing thing to do. Unfortunately Wilde did not mind saying such things about people when they were not there, and so has not only got a reputation for biting

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repartee but raised up to himself many enemies. If you tell A a smart thing about B there is every chance that A will repeat it either directly to B or in such a way that it gets round to B's ears, and usually with clumsy additions which envenom the sting and strip the wit of its grace and lightness.

It was while I was living in Charles Street that Wilde began the study of German. He used to carry a volume of Heine and a small pocket German dictionary with him on his travels, and very seriously worked at this language, having a great desire to know the wonderful German poets in the original. He was rather proud of the fact that he was known in Germany, and I remember the delight with which he told me that he had been written to by the publisher of some German biographical dictionary to supply details about his life and works. He had little reason at that time to anticipate that a day would come when the Germans would rank him with Shakespeare, and indeed show a preference for his works over those of our national poet.¹

¹ It is not in Germany alone that Wilde's name is frequently associated with that of Shakespeare. Apropos of this, here is a true story. After the outbreak of the present war, a high Japanese military official was in consultation with some Russian generals. He apologised for not being able to speak their "own beautiful language," but added, "at least I am able to address you in the language of Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde."

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And here I have to protest vigorously against a statement made by Austin Harrison in his powerful book, *The Kaiser's War*, which I will quote here.

After describing, in the chapter headed "Intelligent Brutality," the Eulenburg scandals, and referring to Krupp's suicide for charges brought against him by the *Vorwaerts* for his conduct at Capri, Mr Harrison says :

"The point to be noted, however, is not the scandals so much as the widespread and morbid interest that they provoked in Germany. In this connection the sympathy extended to Oscar Wilde exceeded all limits of literary enthusiasm, and became an intellectual cult employed as a popular excuse for homosexuality. Oscar Wilde became, in fact, what Shakespeare was to Germans in Schlegel's time. People flocked to see *Salomé*, which ran for years, to talk psychology and physiology, as if Wilde had been a new saviour of Society. I am not criticising, but simply stating a well-known fact when I say that homosexuality became rampant in Berlin as the result of the Wilde boom, became, as it were, the 'smart thing.'"

I am afraid that this is not a correct statement. Possibly in Berlin this may have taken place,

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and we know, unfortunately, that a very bad state of things did and does exist there, but Berlin was interested in that kind of aberration long before Wilde became popular there, and books exist comparing Berlin to one of the cities of the plain. But Berlin is not the Vaterland ; it is not even the capital of the Empire in the usual sense of the word. What affects Berlin leaves Dresden cold and has no influence on München. And Wilde's popularity was universal in Germany, in Catholic and Conservative Dresden, as well as in Protestant and cosmopolitan Berlin, or commercial Hamburg, or artistic München, or the hundred and one other German cities which are as distinct and different from each other as though they were thousands instead of hundreds or scores of miles apart. No, I think Wilde's fame in Germany and his popularity there rest on a due critical appreciation by German Kultur of the excellence of his work. There was, a little while ago, a Shaw boom, and that was preceded by a craze for Beardsley. And as to either of these artists . . . If Berlin had needed to set up some literary idol to excuse certain horrors of immorality there was no need for the Berliners to go abroad for their model. The Fatherland could have supplied them, as revelations have established.

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One of the men who did most to initiate, foster and maintain what Mr Harrison calls the Wilde "boom" in Germany was Doctor Max Meyerfeld, whom I know very well and who used to be a friend of mine. It was he who translated *The Duchess of Padua* and produced it in Germany; it was he who first gave, in a German translation, *De Profundis* to the world. He has written many articles about Wilde in the most important German and Austrian reviews. Dr Meyerfeld is one of the leader-writers on the notorious *Frankfurter Zeitung*, and knowing England well, too well perhaps, may be responsible for a great deal that we have recently read about our country in that organ. Well, in the days before this horrible war was dreamed about—that is to say, about nineteen years ago—Meyerfeld, then a young man, being anxious to study England and the English, came to London. "I had only a small allowance," he relates—I am quoting from a conversation which took place at a house where I used to live, and where he was a guest—"and lived in modest lodgings, but I had brought over some introductions and used to get invitations to good houses. One evening, in my lodgings, being anxious to find something to read, I explored a cupboard and discovered a small volume entitled

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Poems in Prose, by an author of whom I had never heard.¹ I began to read these poems in prose and was absolutely fascinated by the beauty of the style and the brilliance of the author's philosophy. I read the whole book through and then I read it through again. The next evening I was dining out, and being seated at table next to a lady who seemed more than usually intelligent, and who obviously was well informed on English literature, I said to her : ' Can you tell me anything about a writer called " Oscar Wilde " ? I had never heard of him before, but yesterday——' And here," he continued, " I found that I had, as you say, put my foot in it, for the lady gave me an angry look, turned her shoulder on me, and did not speak to me once again during the whole of dinner. The next morning I received a note from my host asking me to come round to his house, and when I saw him, he said to me : ' What do you mean, Meyerfeld, by insulting a lady at my table ? ' I said that I was not aware that I had insulted one of his guests, and he replied that my neighbour at dinner had complained to him that I had actually wanted to discuss Oscar Wilde with

¹ The Doctor must have been mistaken in his description of the book, for *Poems in Prose* was never published in volume form—certainly not as early as 1895. He probably picked up an old number of the *Fortnightly*.

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her at table. I said that I had never heard of Oscar Wilde before, but that I had been greatly impressed by the book of his which I had read on the previous evening, and was anxious to know something about the author. And then my host told me that Oscar Wilde was in prison and that it was a great social offence to mention his name, which had been consigned by the British public to eternal oblivion. I was sorry that I had hurt the good woman's feelings, but that did not diminish my interest in Wilde as a writer. I procured everything that he had written and returned to Germany full of enthusiasm for this great man and fully determined to reveal him to my countrymen."

Not very long ago a friend of mine, being an undergraduate at Oxford, was speaking of Oscar Wilde to a German. "But," said the German, "surely that great writer is one of us—a German, I mean. Herr Vilde, of course, he's a German. We have always been taught so."

Doctor Bendz relates that for years he has used Wilde's works as text-books, and adds that they are so used in many schools in Sweden. With regard to his literary standing in Germany, he adds :

"As for the Germans, it is well known that,

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in accordance with their fine spirit of intellectual hospitality, they were practically the first to recognise Wilde's genius, his writings finding generous acceptance amongst them, and this at a time when in his own country few ventured to manifest an interest in his works. On the other hand, the Germans would, perhaps, seem temperamentally not over well capacitated for a really intimate and subtle valuation of a writer of such an extravagant type. Most German books or pamphlets on Wilde will, in fact, be found deficient in the finer shades of sympathy and intuition."

I think that this evidence is enough to dispose of Mr Harrison's statement that Wilde is popular in Germany because of the sins attributed to him, though possibly the Wilde *cultus* amongst certain lunatics in Berlin may have had its origin in the scandals connected with his name. Another thing to be remembered is that there are in Berlin a number of doctors and social reformers, to mention Doctor Magnus Hirschfeld, for instance, who, for various reasons, physiological and legal, wish to induce the Reichstag to abolish Article 175 of the German Penal Code, a clause corresponding, though with much less severity, to one of the clauses in our Criminal Law Amendment Act.

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One may add that Doctor Richard Strauss, the composer of *Salomé*, might well feel aggrieved that it should be stated that he used a libretto the popularity of which arose from the fact that its author was the hero of an unspeakable scandal. He had such a high opinion of the artistic value of the book that, as may have been noticed, he altered nothing in Wilde's text.

CHAPTER XX

Oscar Wilde as a Patriot—*Ave Imperatrix*—Were Wilde alive To-day—Wilde and the Kultur-Gentry—Wilde as a *Pioupou*—"Well, and why not?"—Oscar Wilde's Marriage—His Cynicism about Married Life—"Act dishonourably"—Willie Wilde's Disastrous Marriage—The Baronne de Bazus—Her Tardy Remorse—A Deathbed Promise—The Victim of a Wealthy Marriage—Willie Wilde portrayed—Constance Wilde—My Last Meeting with her.

To the regret that Oscar Wilde, who would only have been sixty to-day, did not live to see his literary reputation established all over the world, and to enjoy the harvest that he sowed in years of drab and mediocre life, must be added one's feelings of sorrow that this *bon père de famille*, who was prepared for any sacrifice on behalf of his two sons, was never to have the pride and joy of seeing these lads as they now are, one, *mort à l'ennemi*, for ever on England's roll of honour, the other, part of the living rampart which protects against the Teuton hordes their father's beloved France. I have always held that Oscar was, *au fond*, a man of action. I am sure that he would have been intensely proud of the commissions held by his two sons, and that he would have followed their

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progress during the war with as keen an interest as the most ordinary individual amongst British fathers.

One cannot help feeling also that England, during the present crisis, is the loser by the death of a master-poet who felt, or at least was able to show, a fervent patriotism. He had the art of writing verse that stirred the martial spirit. There is no finer patriotic poem in the English language, in the opinion of many, than his *Ave Imperatrix*, that magnificent ode which begins :

“ Set in this stormy Northern sea,
Queen of these restless fields of tide,
England ! what shall men say of thee,
Before whose feet the worlds divide.”

A poem full to-day of the strongest appeal, a large utterance compared with which most of the poetry that the war has evoked is, oh ! how pale. It was written in 1880, and appeared in *The World* for 25th August 1880. Oscar Wilde destined it originally for a magazine called *Time*, which was also edited by Edmund Yates, but that shrewd judge of good work preferred to give it the wider publicity that his weekly journal afforded, and there is in Stuart Mason's *Bibliography* a copy of the letter that the editor wrote to the poet announcing this decision.

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One feels that were Wilde living to-day the Germans, who have such a high esteem for his works and so much respect for his opinion, might have shown a little more decency in their actions, a little more regard for public feeling in England. One knows what Wilde would have thought and would have said about Louvain and Rheims, and one knows what effect his condemnation would have had upon the Kultur-gentry. As things are, the only British writer for whose opinion they care a red Heller is another Irishman, who, unfortunately, instead of flagellating them has rather condoned their unspeakable offences. The Germans hold that from an intellectual point of view there is nobody in England about whose opinion they need care, and so *en avant*. I sincerely believe that the presence of such a man as Wilde, whose intellect and authority they recognised, would have acted as some sort of a check on their conduct. It is, in this connection, noteworthy that the decadence with which Wilde's name was associated in England, and so hugely advertised by the English in their mania for genius-baiting, has never been used as a weapon in Germany with which to attack England, at a time when every kind of abuse is being levelled against us.

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This war would have been most highly approved of by Oscar Wilde. One can fancy his indignation with the Germans for their desire to cripple France, his beloved France, and to sack Paris. England would have had no warmer patriot, the Allies no more ardent supporter. The aims of the Germans would have filled him with anger and disgust, and I can hear him, as I once did, regretting that he was precluded from the use of weapons. I remember his showing me the picture of himself in *Punch*, where he was represented as a French *pioupiou*, which was published just after he had announced that he was thinking of going to France to live there permanently and to become a naturalised Frenchman. This was after his great disappointment when the Lord Chamberlain forbade the performance of *Salomé*. The suggestion was that if he did become a naturalised Frenchman he would be obliged to submit to the law of conscription. "Well, and why not?" he said, though I did not think that he was speaking seriously, because I knew his natural indolence, though I was also well aware that he was not lacking in personal courage. He had a great admiration for the heroic, and admired Lord Byron mainly for his active partisanship of Greece.

It was during my stay at Charles Street that

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Oscar Wilde as a French *Pioupiou*
(By special permission of the proprietors of Punch)

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Oscar Wilde became engaged to Constance Lloyd. I remember his waking me up one morning—he had just returned from Ireland—to tell me the news. I said: “I am very sorry to hear it,” because I did not think he was the kind of man who would settle down to a domestic life. And there was something about hostages to fortune in my mind. Wilde said: “What a brute you are!” but I am quite sure that when the débâcle came he regretted bitterly having associated others with his catastrophe. I understood that the lady had expectations of a good income from her grandfather, but, as Oscar afterwards related, not without humour, “No sooner had the old gentleman joined our hands, and from his deathbed given us his blessing, than he blossomed forth into fresh and vigorous health.” He never spoke to me after that first day about his *fiancée*, or his prospective marriage, nor did I meet his wife until the day after the wedding, when he came over to Paris with her for the honeymoon. He seemed then very much in love, and said that marriage was a wonderful thing. He seemed radiantly happy, and used to send notes and flowers to his bride whenever he left her alone at the hotel. She, on her side, seemed greatly attached to him, and the union had every promise of being felicitous.

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Wilde, in the old days, had been wont to speak cynically about married life. I remember his saying to me that no husband who discovered that his wife was unfaithful to him ought to make a scene. "A far better thing for him to do, and a far better revenge for him to take, would be to pretend that he knew nothing about what was going on, but to give the accomplices no chance of being together. He would sit the lover out, and having retired with his wife to the *thalamos*, would exultingly wave his hand in friendly greeting to the unhappy swain, sighing his heart out in the street, outside his house."

He had a great deal of worldly wisdom about marriages. There was a young man who had eloped from Paris with a girl and was anxious to marry her in London. It was as foolish a scheme as could be conceived, and appeared so at once to Oscar Wilde, who was a friend of the would-be bridegroom. Oscar went to see them at the hotel where they were staying, waiting for the three weeks to elapse before they could be married, and, "Act dishonourably, my friend, act dishonourably. You may be sure that that is what she is doing," was the advice that he gave. After my own marriage, when I had told him what I had done, he said: "Ah, now I understand why you have never been to

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see me.” He was very indignant about his brother Willie’s marriage with Mrs Frank Leslie, who, after her divorce from Willie, blossomed out into the Baronne de Bazus, and said that Willie had acted very foolishly in not insisting on a settlement before he married the rich American woman. “She will tire of him, of course, in time, and then she will know how to get rid of him.” Which is exactly what happened. It was a most disastrous marriage for poor Willie, for whom, however, a second marriage reserved in great happiness some compensation.

Many years after Willie’s death, I met this Baronne de Bazus, and could not help wondering what had attracted Willie to her. That she was a *femme à hommes* it needed but a short acquaintance with her to observe. I had been sent to take her to some function to which the lady who was then my wife had asked her. I remember saying that we ought to make haste, and she said that my wife ought not to have sent such a messenger if she expected the *tête-à-tête* to be a short one. I wasn’t particularly flattered, because I could see that that is what the Baronne would have said to any man. She made me sit down on the sofa beside her, and gave me the benefit of her senile coquetries. I was, however,

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able to lead the conversation round to her former husband, and I was pleased to hear that she spoke very kindly of Willie Wilde, and seemed to regret her treatment of him. She told me that she had made a point, on her arrival in England, of trying to find where he was buried, as she had wished to place a wreath on his grave, but had been unable to trace it. I told her that Willie had been very ill for a long time before he died and had been unable to follow his profession, and so had died very poor, and I told her that there were very many great literary men in England—William Blake and Chatterton, for instance—who, like him, had no memorials except in the hearts of their countrymen. She said that if he had cared to work in her office she would have given him a good place on her pay-roll. I said that Willie's talents hardly lay in the direction of editorial work on such publications as *Leslie's Weekly*. She said that he would do nothing but spend his time at the Century Club and inform people that what New York lacked was a leisured class, and that he, Willie Wilde, was determined to introduce such a class. "So," she concluded, "one day I decided that I was through and called the reporters together and told them that I had decided to divorce Mr Wilde, as he was of no use to me either by day or by night." She

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added that though she had been married several times she had not yet given up the hope of being happily married in the end. Unfortunately, most of the men who seemed "likely" were already married.

She had been told that I was to fetch her in our electric brougham, but this had broken down and I had nothing for her conveyance but an ordinary taxi. When she saw this vehicle, she cried out: "What's that? I don't like riding in public conveyances." And she showed her displeasure (for which I was truly thankful) during the whole of the drive in a prolonged sulk. I afterwards saw her several times in London, and each time my wonder grew how Willie Wilde could ever have married her—a love match on his side, for he had nothing to look to from her except a "place on her payroll." I do not think that he derived any pecuniary advantage whatever from his ill-starred alliance with her. She was not a liberal woman. I remember her telling me of the large fortune she had amassed—as a matter of fact, she left over four hundred thousand pounds at her death, and bequeathed it all to the American Suffragette cause—and how everybody was at her for loans, and so on. "But I have a good way of getting out of that," she told me. "I

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tell them I'd just love to oblige, only that I am kept from it by a deathbed oath which I took when Frank Leslie was handing in his checks. I tell them I swore, at Frank Leslie's request, that I would never lend a cent to any man or woman in this world, so that the poor fellow died happy. And I never have done so."

It was indeed a disastrous marriage for Willie. He went out to America a fine, brilliantly clever man, quite one of the ablest writers on the Press. He was a man who could have reached his three or four thousand a year easily. The Baronne de Bazus sent him back to England a nervous wreck, with an exhausted brain and a debilitated frame. This did not show itself at first, but it soon became apparent that his power for sustained effort was gone. His fate was in some ways as pathetic as that of his brother, and a more lingering tragedy was his. For though he had domestic happiness, and was never exposed to real want, he suffered bitterly from his loss of powers. He had been robbed of his golden years and seemed to me like some unhappy Samson, deprived of his sight. But just like his brother, he was gallant, and never once laid the blame of his unfortunate downfall where he might justly have done so. But, at any rate, the Christine to his Monaldeschi did not pursue

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him with malice and hatred, and, after she had ridded herself of him, seems to have tried only to think well of him. In some women, not unlike Nero in this respect, gross cruelty arises as the aftermath of unbridled passion.

Inasmuch as it may help to understand Oscar, I would like to quote some passages about Willie Wilde from Mr Leonard Cresswell Ingleby's book on Oscar Wilde.

“Oscar” (he writes) “himself always paid a tribute to his brother's brilliant cleverness, and I am not at all certain that, of the two, William Wilde's was not the greater intelligence—though he certainly never approached his brother from any artistic point of view. . . . Willie performed the most astonishing feats of writing. He was able to sum up a situation, political or social, in a single moment. . . . Willie Wilde was also a most delightful talker. . . . When he had talked to you for an hour or two, you always went away chuckling with pleasure rather than stumbling in mental amazement. He told good stories in his inimitable way and they were always kindly. . . . He said kind things of everyone, and if he referred to a friend or acquaintance, it was always with an excuse for the failings of that friend or acquaintance. . . . His

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voice was one of those soft Irish voices, full of cadence and not innocent of blarney. He was a typical Irishman, kindly, casual and generous, and all his outlook upon life was sweet and tolerant."

Into his own marriage Oscar Wilde imported nothing of the cynicism with which he spoke of marriage in general. He became what the French call *un bon père de famille*, was a kind husband and an excellent father. His distinguished sons remembered him with deep affection. But he was not made for family life, and long before the débâcle the marriage had proved itself a failure.

I frequently met Constance at her house, and admired her very much. She was beautiful and gracious, kind-hearted, and devoted to her husband, for whose great cleverness she had the highest admiration. In the awful tragedy which befell the house in Tite Street, it was for her that one felt the deepest sorrow. I was glad that I was able to be of some service to her in those days, though the hope that I had entertained, that in the end things might yet be adjusted between them, proved itself a vain one. Certainly on the last occasion on which I saw this gentle and beautiful woman she was full of

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love and sorrow for her husband, and told me that when he came out of prison he would find a home with her. This was not to be, and the two never came together again, because when Oscar came out of prison his wife was already sickening of the malady of which she died a few months later. He was released in May 1897, she died in April, 1898.

CHAPTER XXI

A Newspaper Sensation—Doubts about Wilde's Death—Mr Cravan Lloyd—*The New York Times* and the *Canard*—Ross's Account of the Death—A Supreme Act of Devotion—Jacob Epstein's Monument—Would Wilde have approved of it?—Oscar Wilde and the Sculptors—Donoghue of Chicago—A Dutch Sculptor—Oscar Wilde and Beardsley—The Real Discoverer of Beardsley—A Beardsley Portrait of Wilde—"The Man in the Moon"—The Friendship between Smithers and Oscar Wilde.

THE sorrowful speculation indulged in above as to what would have been Oscar Wilde's attitude at the present crisis reminds me to refer to the story, believed in by many, that he did not die in 1900 in Paris, that he is still alive, that he is living under another name, and, hardest of all to credit, is wearing a big beard.

The compliment of refusing to believe them mortal has been paid by humanity to many of its great men. It is indeed hard to realise the death and extinction of men of great powers and radiant intelligence. For my own part, as I have said, it seems to me that Wilde must be living still, although I am too well aware that he is dead. This impression is strongest when one reads his books, or listens to one of his plays; he then seems to be sitting at one's side,

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and one could almost bring oneself to address him.

I remember that when I first met Robert Ross, long after the last scene in the Rue des Beaux-Arts, my first question to him was : " Is Oscar really dead ? I can hardly realise it."

The legend as to his survival, as far as I have been able to trace its source, seems to have originated in the mind of an American newspaper reporter, probably a man writing on " space rates," who was anxious to get up a sensational article. It was just the kind of story which would appeal to the readers of the Sunday papers of the American yellow press. The authority quoted was a Mr Arthur Cravan Lloyd, who claims to be Oscar Wilde's nephew by marriage, and who combines the profession of poet with the craft of the pugilist. He is reported to have declared that his Uncle Oscar called on him in Paris, on 23rd March 1913, and had a drink with him. He added that Uncle Oscar had grown fat and was wearing a beard. Oscar seems to have told him nothing about himself beyond that he was writing his memoirs. This story was much quoted at the time, and evoked a number of quite unnecessary refutations. Henri Davray thought it requisite to announce : "*J'ai touché son cadavre.*" Those who *were* at the deathbed

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said nothing, disdaining the discussion. These were Mr Robert Ross, Mr Reginald Turner and Monsieur Dupoirier. Apropos of whom, as none of these gentlemen has written any biography of Wilde, one wonders what Lord Alfred Douglas meant when he announced that he was the "only one of Wilde's biographers in whose arms the author of *Lady Windermere's Fan* did not die."

Robert Ross was holding Wilde's hand when he passed, and has thus described the passing:

"About five-thirty in the morning (November 30) a complete change came over him, the lines of the face altered, and I believe what is called the death-rattle began, but I had never heard anything like it before, it sounded like the horrible turning of a crank, and it never ceased until the end. His eyes did not respond to the light-test any longer. Foam and blood came continually from his mouth. . . . From one o'clock we did not leave the room, the painful noise from the throat became louder and louder. We destroyed letters to keep ourselves from breaking down. The two nurses were out and the proprietor of the hotel had come up to take their place; at 1.45 the time of his breathing altered. I went to the bedside and held his

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hand, his pulse began to flutter. He heaved a deep sigh, the only natural one I had heard since I arrived, the limbs seemed to stretch involuntarily, the breathing became fainter, he passed at ten minutes to two exactly."

Authority was unfortunately given to the story by the Paris correspondent of *The New York Times*. This is not a yellow sheet ; it is a paper which the French would call *un journal très sérieux*, and it has always striven to maintain its reputation for being accurate in its literary news. As I have worked for it, I know what is demanded of its staff. Well, the Paris correspondent of *The New York Times*, in a special cable on 8th November 1913, declared that, after careful investigation, he "now almost believed that we shall see Wilde back in Paris some day." He stated that he had been unable to find anyone who saw Wilde dead and made the inaccurate statement that priest, doctor and inn-keeper had disappeared. He interviewed Arthur Cravan by proxy and learned that Wilde had become almost bald and that what hair was left was white. "His complexion was very much bronzed, which was the effect of the sunny lands where he has resided since his disappearance." Cravan is stated to have added that the coffin



OSCAR WILDE AFTER DEATH.

Deaths within the District of the British Consulate at <u>Genoa</u>						
No.	When and Where Died.	Name and Surname	Sex.	Age.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the time of Death.
533	7 th April in 1898 Genoa	Constance Mary Wilde nee Lloyd	Female	40	Married woman	Genoa
						Signature, Description, and Residence of Informant.
						When Registered.
						Signature of Diplomat or Consular Officer.

I, William Keene Esquire, Her Britannic Majesty's Consul General at Genoa

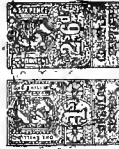
do hereby certify, That this is a true Copy of the Entry of the Death of Constance Mary Wilde (nee Lloyd) kept at this Consulate General.

Witness my Hand and Seal, this

No. 533

day of December 1898

W. Keene



A. B. M. Consul General.

Death Certificate of Mrs Oscar Wilde

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contained, among other things, a glass jar "in which were a tragedy and a comedy, the last things he had written before his disappearance." The correspondent adds that Charles Sibleigh, a literary man living in Paris, said to him: "Cravan's story brought to my mind the last words spoken to me by Wilde in his most quiet and impressive manner, a few weeks before I heard of his death. He said: 'Sibleigh, I am going to begin life all over again. There is nothing for me here in England (?) or in America.'"

According to this cable the story was originally invented by a 'hyphenated American' poet called George Sylvester Viereck, who may be now finding useful employment for his talents on the German Press Bureau. Cravan was said to have offered "a wager of £1000 if the State digs up the coffin supposed to contain Wilde's body in Père-Lachaise and does not find an entirely different occupant."

Robert Ross has said nothing to refute these stories. Though, of course, they are mere sensation-mongering, they may give some consolation to thousands of Wilde's humbler and more ignorant admirers, as, for instance, the Jews in Russia, who all treasure the Yiddish translation of his *Soul of Man under Socialism* and have his portrait pinned up in the *isba*. And indirectly,

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doubtless, they help in the way of advertisement and so are beneficial to the Wilde estate. Nobody better than Ross could tell what that coffin in Père-Lachaise contains, as into it, with his own pious hands, he laid the remains of Oscar Wilde, which he personally removed from the grave in Bagneux cemetery, where they had lain ten years. Yes, Robert Ross actually went down into the yawning pit of death and corruption, and with his own hands dug out and transferred to the new coffin, the still decaying remnants of his friend's body. This is the Mr Ross whom people have persecuted and harassed, and endeavoured to ruin. I wonder if ever such a friend existed as the one of whom Oscar, in his lifetime, when Ross's service was only really beginning, described as the perfect mirror of friendship.

One of the writers who discussed this story about Wilde being still alive wondered if Oscar had visited his monument in Père-Lachaise, and what he thought about it. One wonders. For my part, I never considered Mr Jacob Epstein's inspiration a happy one. I agreed with a writer in the *Paris Journal* who, after the "gesture" of Alistair Crowley in unveiling the statue in defiance of the Paris Municipal authorities, wrote: "People may think what

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they like about this monument, object to the precise systematic style of the kneeling angel which imitates the rigidity of Egyptian sculpture and which, severe, cold, even ponderous, is but poorly adapted to commemorate a poet whose mind, quite on the contrary, was refined, subtle, full of *nuances*, but one must be singularly timid or have an imagination very prompt to pruriency to find anything obscene in it. And yet certain modifications were demanded of the sculptor on the grounds of decency, and as usual all that was arrived at was to underline in the most unpleasant manner the detail which it was desired to hide and which so many sculptures exhibit in the public gardens of Paris."

The whole trouble arose from the fact that there exists in France a law, passed in the first years of the French Republic, forbidding for use as funereal monuments any statues of nudities to which the fig-leaf was wanting. The Prefect of Police had no personal feeling in the matter, he had to apply the law. Epstein's *Sphinx* could have been erected in any public square of Paris, but was illegal in consecrated ground. A bronze fig-leaf was therefore supplied and to this Epstein, according to letters which he wrote to the Press, objected strongly. "I should much have preferred," he wrote, "the

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monument to remain veiled until such time as the alleged improvements made against my express desires have been removed." The law of Year Five of the One and Indivisible Republic was passed at a time of great public licence and was intended to protect the feelings of those who visit cemeteries on errands of piety. The legislator, of course, had not foreseen Mr Jacob Epstein. The French are very sensitive about their dead and their resting-places, and I do think that Mr Epstein's nudities would have given much offence to the Parisian *bourgeoisie*, and in this way have reacted unfavourably on Wilde's memory in France. When the time comes for Wilde's bones to be removed to Dublin, where they belong (as more than one prominent Irishman has pointed out to me), I am quite sure that the bronze fig-leaf will have to accompany Mr Epstein's memorial.

I think Wilde would have been flattered by the proportions of the monument, not unworthy of an Assyrian king, or Persian conqueror. I do not know to what extent he would have found it emblematic of his genius. It suggests the author of *The Sphinx*, but seems alien to him who wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Oscar Wilde always professed a great admiration for good sculpture. We have heard of his

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long stations in front of the Venus of Milos in the Louvre. His study there of Nero's bust may possibly have been prompted by another motive. He used to express real delight in a certain statue that stands in the garden of the Tuileries, at the extreme end of the garden, just opposite the Louvre and on the river side. This was the statue of a dancing boy, and I have found him there, seated in contemplation of it. "I like to visit it every day," he said to me, and I really think that he did. Though he often talked about Art with his tongue in his cheek, he was sincere enough here, and I don't think that he imagined I should disbelieve him. He was well aware how people doubt the Art-lover's sincerity and think his professions only his stock in trade. He used to tell me, as a joke, how, after his first lecture in New York on Art, a number of young bloods came to take him "down-town," saying that, after talking "soul-throb" all the evening, on Art and Beauty and Virtue and the rest, naturally he would be wanting to go and see the girls.

I am not aware that Oscar Wilde's bust was ever executed, and it is a pity.¹ There was a

¹ A bas-relief of Oscar Wilde was executed in America in January 1882 by J. E. Kelly. A bust was evolved in Paris in 1914, by a Monsieur Patlagean.

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Chicago sculptor called Donoghue, who did a medallion of him, which still exists, but it was not a very satisfactory piece of work. In the early days of my friendship with Wilde, Donoghue was always "butting in." He used to profess great affection for and gratitude towards him. Wilde told me that when he was lecturing in Chicago he received, one day, a letter from this Donoghue, telling him that he was a sculptor and announcing great artistic ambitions, which, he wrote, were being stifled by his poverty and the indifference of the Chicago public. Wilde at once went to visit his studio, and that same night introduced a long reference to the sculptor into his lecture, telling the audience that they were allowing a man of genius who was in their midst to perish of want. The result was that Donoghue was visited by a number of clients next day, and soon received enough commissions to enable him to travel to Europe and continue his studies. I imagine that in the end he did rather well at his craft, but when Oscar's troubles came, Donoghue was not one of those who stood by his former friend and benefactor. I understood that he perished miserably.

I remember once that Oscar Wilde used to come to Plowden Buildings in the Temple to sit

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for his bust to a Dutch sculptor, whose acquaintance he had made through John Gray, a young poet who, in those days, lived in Plowden Buildings.

The Dutch sculptor was not at all successful with his modelling, and an appalling caricature of Oscar was the result of the Temple sittings. I declare that what he produced reminded one rather of Pecksniff than of the author of *Charmides*, and I believe that Oscar was very angry with the poor sculptor and actually rude to him. There are, however, many antique busts which might pass for portraits of Wilde, at least as far as the upper part of the face is concerned. I have seen a Tiberius which reminded me of him. He was never successfully painted, though one would have thought that the portrait-painters would have besieged him with demands for sittings. On the other hand, many excellent black-and-white sketches of him exist. The *Punch* caricatures are, generally speaking, very good likenesses of him.

Whatever Whistler may have said about Wilde's ignorance of Art, the fact remains that it was he who "discovered" Beardsley, the Beardsley whom others, with singular impudence, claim to have invented. Inventing Beardsley! One even hesitates to use the word "discovered,"



THE ORIGINAL OF THE FIRST WASH-DRAWING MADE BY AUBREY BEARDSLEY
FOR "SALOME."

The "face in the moon" is a portrait of Oscar Wilde.

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for a genius like Beardsley discovers itself, and cannot be kept in obscurity. I perfectly well remember how Oscar Wilde, with real satisfaction, told me that he had discovered a youth who was the very man to illustrate *Salomé*. "It is a young man who has been working for *The Pall Mall Budget*. I had noticed his work for some time, and have now got into touch with him. He is perfectly wonderful." This was Aubrey Beardsley, and it is certain that Oscar Wilde's commission to him for the *Salomé* drawings gave him his first real chance. In this sense Wilde may be said to have discovered Beardsley, and to be in some way his artistic sponsor. Wilde paid Beardsley for his work, and it was at Wilde's expense that *Salomé* was produced. John Lane was nominally the publisher of *Salomé*, but he took no risk in the matter, receiving copies from Wilde to sell as the demand arose, and taking a commission on the sales. As to which there was being hawked round Germany a curious autograph letter from Oscar Wilde to this publisher, a portion of which, without my knowledge or consent, was published in facsimile in the German edition of my *Life of Oscar Wilde*. It refers to some dispute between Wilde and John Lane, and establishes the fact that *Salomé* was published at Wilde's expense,

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OSCAR WILDE AT WORK

"IL NE FAUT PAS LE REGARDER"



OSCAR WILDE AT WORK

By Aubrey Beardsley

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and that John Lane had nothing to do with that book beyond selling it on commission. It establishes the fact that it was Oscar Wilde who was Beardsley's earliest patron. Beardsley in those days was a very shy, nervous lad, who said "sir" to people, and who reeked of genius.

I am able to give in these pages a facsimile of the very first drawing that he made for *Salomé*, a wash drawing, of which the original was lent me for this book by its owner, a great Beardsley enthusiast. He pointed out to me that this drawing is a much better piece of work than the one which was eventually used for the book, and called special attention to the expression of the man's face in the moon, and to the modelling of the feet. This picture is all the more interesting because the face in the moon is Beardsley's early idea of Oscar Wilde's face, and is therefore Wilde's portrait by Beardsley. It was doubtless one of the great good fortunes of Oscar Wilde's artistic career that in *Salomé* he was associated with Beardsley, and the inverse also holds true. I take it that the tremendous vogue which, alas, after his death also, Beardsley enjoyed in Germany, where his drawings realise fabulous prices, was initiated by his concurrence with Oscar Wilde.

Another artist of genius, of whom one has

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heard nothing for many years, but whose coloured drawings for *The Harlot's House* have been searched for all over the world, was Miss Althea Gyles, who was commissioned by Smithers to illustrate the poem, which was issued in 1904, as from "The Mathurin Press." I have seen many letters from Miss Gyles to Smithers, and from one of them it appears that a sum of seventy pounds was paid for the five coloured drawings, described by Smithers as "weirdly powerful and beautiful." The poem was issued at two guineas, "with the Illustrations printed on plate paper, and the text on hand-made paper, enclosed in a portfolio 15 inches by 11 inches in size." One does not know what a copy of the Edition de Grand Luxe of this poem "on pure vellum with three sets of the illustrations," published at twelve guineas, of which only twelve copies were printed, would fetch in the market to-day.¹ Some time ago the friend who has lent me the original Althea Gyles drawing to illustrate the line, "The shadows raced across the blind," was talking in London with a big dealer, who, referring to Althea Gyles,

¹ A gentleman, who is undoubtedly the best authority on Wilde bibliography, writes as to this: "Smithers' edition of *The Harlot's House* was issued in much larger numbers than he stated (as is the case with all his piracies), and even the so-called *edition de grand luxe*, published at £12, 12s., does not fetch more than £2."



"THE SHADOWS RACED ACROSS THE BLIND."

From the Althea Gyles original illustration for "The Harlot's House."

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said : “ We are all wondering what has become of the originals that were used for the gravures for *The Harlot's House*. They were last heard of some years ago—before the great Wilde boom—as at Walter T. Spencer's at New Oxford Street, who catalogued them at twenty-five pounds. Since then there has been a regular search for them, as there are many collectors who wish to purchase them. I myself have made inquiries in every direction.” “ Well,” said my friend, “ it may interest you to know that they are safely at home in my house in the Midlands, in a portfolio, behind the sofa in my study.” It was from this portfolio that I borrowed the Althea Gyles drawing which I reproduce in these pages.

It was Leonard Smithers who initiated his acquaintanceship with Wilde, which afterwards grew into a real friendship. He seems to have written to him from Leeds, where, at that time, he was practising as a solicitor, to congratulate him on *The Happy Prince*. Wilde wrote back to him, an amiable letter, which is extant. Smithers was afterwards of great use to Wilde, as he became his publisher when nobody else would touch the poet's works. But for him *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* might not, at least in Wilde's lifetime, have seen the light. Smithers

15, TITE STREET,
CHelsea, S.W.

my Dear Sir

I must very
sincerely thank
you for your
charming letter
and am glad
to think that
the Happy Prince
has found so

a form that
aims at delicacy
and imaginative
treatment - it
is a reaction
against the
purely imitative
character of
modern art -
and now that
literature has

sympathetic and
admires, so
gracious a
cover. The
story is an
attempt to
treat a
tragic modern
problem in

taken to blowing
loud trumpets
I cannot but
be pleased that
some ear has
cared to listen
to the low
music of a
little reed. So
I thank you
again, and remain
faithfully yours
Oscar Wilde

Facsimile of the first Letter written by Oscar Wilde to Leonard Smithers, who afterwards became his publisher

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made a great deal of money out of Wilde, but, on the other hand, Wilde did get something from Smithers. Smithers's real trade was that of vendor of erotic literature. He was an authority on eighteenth-century pornography. I remember his once showing me a large volume, which, he told me, he was selling for six hundred pounds. There are collectors of books of this kind, as I knew. Smithers also published pornographic books himself, and had a genius for employing genuine artists to supply him with "copy" and illustrations. His meeting with Wilde was in a sense his redemption. He was immensely proud of the connection and acted generously, according to his lights, towards the unhappy poet.

CHAPTER XXII

Necessary Correction—My Acquaintance with Robert Ross—Lord Alfred Douglas's Testimony—Oscar Wilde as Journalist—Fits of Depression—His Threats of Suicide—Two Letters to Smithers—Wilde Autographs—A Neglected Bargain—"Wilde Items"—A Stolen Letter—The Word "Love"—*Voyagez et oubliez*—The Attitude in Paris—An Article in *Le Gaulois*—Is he really important?—"Oscariana" and their Price—An Emperor of the Decadence.

MY stay in Oscar Wilde's lodgings in Charles Street was not a long one. With the exception of two or three days at Berneval after his release from prison, this was the last time that I ever spent a night under the same roof with him. Indeed, after my return to Paris in 1883, I saw very little of my friend, except on his occasional visits to Paris and my still rarer journeys to London. Life is so ordered to-day that many very good friends rarely see each other. For years I used to look on Coquelin Cadet as one of my best friends, a sentiment which he kindly reciprocated, but though we were living in Paris for years and years together, I rarely if ever saw him, except when I went to the Comédie, and then only on the stage. One has to mind one's own spinning, and it is a good thing, because I

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think friendship lasts longer when there is not too much intimacy. The awful failure of matrimony seems to result from the intolerable obligation it lays upon two people of being constantly in each other's company. Wilde and I were excellent friends, but we saw very little of each other for years. He usually, but by no means always, let me know when he came to Paris. When I went to London I usually wrote for an appointment, but not always. Indeed I have recorded how he blamed me once for not going to see him, and the curious explanation he gave of it.

Lord Alfred Douglas is inaccurate when he states, therefore, in his book, that I was constantly with Wilde and Ross in the years which preceded his own acquaintanceship with the former. It is a fact that I never even heard of Robert Ross until 1895, after the Wilde scandal had broken out, and the very first time I met him was, I think, when I went over to London after Wilde's release on bail. We afterwards journeyed to Reading together on more than one occasion, and off and on I have seen something of him since, but by no means enough. I think him one of the finest fellows in the world, and would like Ibsen to have known him. He might have cured him of his pessimism about humanity.

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I knew nothing about many of Wilde's acquaintances, nor ever heard their names mentioned. All those weird people who were spoken about, or put in their appearances at the Wilde trials, were folk of whose very existence I was ignorant. The first time I met Alfred Douglas was one day when I found him sitting with Oscar Wilde in an upstairs room in the Café Royal, but I do not remember the date. It was some time when he was not on friendly terms with his father, and almost the first thing he said to me was that he had been burning candles at the Brompton Oratory for a purpose which had better be left unrecorded. I saw nothing whatever wrong in their association. They seemed to admire each other very much. Oscar pontified and Douglas listened with a certain amount of humorous criticism to his remarks. The Max Beerbohm caricature of the couple as they used to be seen together is an excellent piece of observation. We have Lord Alfred Douglas's statement that during all the time that he knew Oscar Wilde he never saw anything wrong in his conduct, and this, I should say, is the very best evidence of Wilde's innocence, because, according to Ransome, Wilde had been "experimenting" in certain kinds of aberration for three years before he met Lord Alfred Douglas, and



OSCAR WILDE.
By Max Beerbohm.

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afterwards succumbed to the mania. I do not know on what evidence Mr Ransome makes this statement. I certainly saw nothing of it, and though my testimony may count for little, as I saw very little of Wilde during all those years, the same cannot be said of Lord Alfred Douglas, who, for some years, was constantly in his company. At the same time Wilde does not appear to have concealed in any way whatever his curious associations with people so vastly his social inferiors. I do not think that anybody who knew him would have seen any reason for grave suspicion in that. Tolstoy had the strangest frequentations, and Christian Socialism, such as used to be preached by the Abbé Garnier in Paris, would explain all that the love of eccentricity left undecided. The thirst of the modern writer for the *document humain* is the reason for the strangest frequentations. We see Lord Tennyson "hanging with grooms" on the bridge at Coventry, and one has heard of the virtuous *bourgeois*, Emile Zola, frequenting the society of *demi-mondaines* and *souteneurs*, so as to document himself for *Nana*, and do not think worse of either of them. The interpretation which the prosecution put upon Wilde's frequentations surprised me immensely, but must have surprised and shocked Lord Alfred Douglas even more.

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During all those years I never doubted that one day Oscar Wilde would come to his own. I had the most absolute faith in his star. People who did not like him, and there were a great many, especially amongst literary folk who could not forgive him the numerous editions of his poems and his successful lecture tours, people who had been delighted by Labouchere's *Exit Oscar*, were ever so pleased when they heard that he had taken up some hack work in La Belle Sauvage, and, contemner of journalists, had become one himself. It certainly was sad to see Oscar trudging to his office, but it must be said that he made a gallant show. He was always faultlessly dressed, in a thoroughfare where men all *de parti pris* seemed to dress shockingly, and to show himself blithe and gay, he always had a flower in his buttonhole. And he seemed to take a real interest in the work, and some little pride in the scanty patronage which his position as editor gave him. Yet there were times when the drudgery of the life weighed upon him. We have a record of him at his office in La Belle Sauvage from the mouth of Mr Arthur Fish, who was his assistant in the particular "rabbit-hutch" (I am quoting Rider Haggard) which was assigned to the production of *The Woman's World*. "At first the work was taken quite

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seriously," writes Mr Fish, "and eleven o'clock on his appointed morning saw the poet entering the dingy portals of 'the Yard,' but after a few months his arrival became later and his departure earlier, until at times his visit was little more than a call. After a very short time in my association with him I could tell by the sound of his approach along the resounding corridor whether the necessary work to be done would be met cheerfully or postponed to a more congenial period. In the latter case, he would sink with a sigh into his chair, carelessly glance at his letters, give a perfunctory look at proofs or make-up, ask: 'Is it necessary to settle anything to-day?' put on his hat, and, with a sad 'Good-morning,' depart again. On his cheerful days, however, everything was different. These were fairly constant in the spring days of the year—there would be a smiling entrance, letters would be answered with epigrammatic brightness, there would be a cheery interval of talk when the work was accomplished, and the dull room would brighten under the influence of his great personality."

Mr Fish saw Wilde, then, in moods in which I never found him. I mean as to his moods of depression. I do not think that I ever saw Wilde sad or depressed. Even on that awful night when I found him in bed, a nervous wreck, in

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his room in Oakley Street, with the lily drooping from a tumbler on the mantelpiece, over his head, he was completely master of himself. He had by no means surrendered his personality. Indeed, he seemed to me to be enjoying the opportunity of playing a part, a very tragic part, before the poor, insignificant audience of myself. His histrionism was hyaline. He kept repeating: "Robert, Robert, why have you brought me no poison from Paris?" I am convinced that the opportunity of creating a rôle of such tremendous tragedy delighted him so that he forgot for the time being all the hideous circumstances by which he was environed. Even in prison he was quite master of himself, and though, naturally, not cheerful, seemed by no means overwhelmed. I cannot believe that he ever seriously contemplated suicide, though he frequently warns Smithers that he has it in view. I have before me a very curious letter of his to the publisher, which is, I think, worth reproducing *in extenso*, because, apart from the threat it contains, it throws light on his position at the time. It is dated from the Villa Guidice, 16th November 1897, and runs:

"MY DEAR SMITHERS,—Do remember that what is comedy to you may be the reverse of

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comic to others. Since I received your letter in which you said 'I expect that before the arrival of this letter you will have received the £10' I have been down twice a day to Naples to Cook's office and I have just returned from third visit now, 5.30. Of course there was nothing, and I am really ashamed of my endless inquiries about a sum of £10 to be telegraphed from London. Perhaps you only wrote what you did to give me hope, but, my dear fellow, hope constantly disappointed makes one's bread bitter, especially as I have just heard from *my own* solicitor to say that as I am in Naples with — he is going to give his decision that I am leading an infamous life, and so deprive me of my sole income, £38 a quarter! For one's own Solicitor this seems a little strong. Unluckily he has it in his power to stop my wretched allowance and is going to do so, and as I see my poem is a very unsaleable affair" (*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*) "I simply have starvation or suicide before me — the latter, as I dislike pain, for choice."

He concludes this letter, in which he expresses the thought that there is "just a chance" of a big sale for the ballad, with the words: "The weather is entrancing, but in my heart there is no sun."

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Three weeks later he again writes to Smithers and again threatens suicide.

“ I await the revise ” (he writes) “ and promise not to make my quietus with a bare bodkin till I have returned them. After that I think of retiring. But first I would like to dine with you here. To leave life as one leaves a feast is not merely philosophy, but romance.”

If space allowed of it, one would like to quote the whole of this letter. It appears that Miss Marbury had proposed that *The Ballad* should be illustrated and Oscar writes :

“ Her suggestion of *illustrations* is of course out of the question. Pray tell her from me that I feel that it would entirely spoil any beauty the poem has, and not add anything to its psychological revelations. The horror of prison-life is the contrast between the grotesqueness of one's aspect and the tragedy of one's soul. Illustrations would emphasise the former and conceal the latter. Of course I refer to realistic illustration.”

In the same letter he humorously pays off an old score he seems to have had against Jerome K. Jerome. He writes :

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“ I have seen the Academy with its list of Immortals. It is very funny what sort of people are proposed. But it is sufficient, no doubt, to make out a list. Personally I cannot make up my mind as to whether the Duke of Argyll or Jerome K. Jerome has the better claims. I think the former. The unread is always better than the unreadable.”

I quote this passage as it is the only instance that I can recall of Wilde stooping to bear a grudge against anybody. Jerome was in Court on 11th April 1895, during the proceedings at Bow Street after Wilde's arrest. He had previously attacked *The Chameleon* in his periodical, *To-Day*, and had demanded its withdrawal. But Wilde always declared that he objected to *The Chameleon* and had nothing to do with it. “ It is possible,” writes Mr Stuart Mason, “ that Wilde had given offence to Mr Jerome previously, as he is reported to have said that the author of *Three Men in a Boat* was ‘ vulgar without being funny.’ ”

Wilde always used to speak against suicide. He once said to me that nobody should commit suicide, as that was the highest compliment that one could pay to society.

Mr Fish might have explained Wilde's rest-

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lessness and depression on his visits to "the Yard" by the fact that all smoking is strictly prohibited on the premises of the Messrs Cassell. I think one may not even smoke in the yard itself. I remember asking Wilde how he could manage to exist without his cigarette for so long a time, and referred to the French saying: "As sad as a day without tobacco." He said: "Oh, one makes up one's mind that one cannot and one does not." A confirmed smoker is both restless and miserable if he is kept from his pleasure, even worse than the drinker. Wilde told me the same about his deprivation in prison. "One makes up one's mind that one cannot and one does not." As a matter of fact, at Reading, at least, he might have smoked, as there was a friend in office there who would have facilitated the indulgence and was prepared to give the prisoner a supply of "snout," not to chew, but actually to smoke. Wilde, however, had the strength of mind to refuse, not that he was not sorely tempted to accept, but because he feared he might get his friend into very serious trouble.

The letters from which I quote above came on the market after poor Smithers had gone bankrupt and was in sore straits to live. They were sold for mere trifles. It is stated that in 1906 eight hundred letters written by Oscar Wilde

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were offered for sale at the price of forty pounds, but no buyer could be found. Nowadays either of the two letters from which I quote above would fetch at the very least fifty pounds, and probably much more. People who do not read the catalogues of the autograph merchants can have little idea of the tremendous prices that Wilde holographs fetch, not that these are scarce, but on account of the extraordinary interest that is taken in the man. A year or two ago a Wilde letter was offered for sale in a dealer's catalogue at a price four times as large as that asked for a letter from Queen Victoria, and an interesting letter at that. Anybody who, in 1906, which was the date, by the way, when my *Life of Wilde* first appeared, had invested forty pounds in those letters would have realised a considerable fortune. I do not know how many applications I have received from dealers in all parts of the world asking me if I have any "Wilde items" to sell.

I suppose that very few people have had more, or more interesting, "Wilde items," but almost everything that I possessed of this kind has been stolen. When one is always travelling about, "items" of every variety are liable to be dispersed. I have related how all the letters which Wilde wrote me at the beginning of our friendship

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turned up in the hands of a baroness. Others, and not letters from Wilde alone, but from his friends, which at various times were stolen, seem to have been used in blackmailing attempts. The other day I was supplied with the copy of a letter which had been addressed to me at the time that Wilde was in prison. It came from one of his friends, who was abroad, and in its way was a compromising document, which I ought to have destroyed. However, the man who wrote it is a person who is very well able to take care of himself, and I am sorry for anybody who, in possession of this letter, may attempt to blackmail him on the strength of it. Not that there was anything very bad in it, but certainly a "curious construction" might be put upon it. He bids me, on my next visit to Wilde in prison, tell him "that I love him and I am only living in the hope of seeing him again when he comes out. Tell him that if he dies in prison, or if I lose his love, I shall kill myself. As it is life is hard enough to bear," and so on. This particular person has satisfied everybody that his friendship for Wilde was quite a proper one, and the quotation, therefore, may serve to show with what extraordinary affection Wilde was able to inspire his friends. For my own part I do not see much to gird against in the use of

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this word "love" as between male friends. The Latin word for friend derives from *amor*. A Roman loved his friend. When he wrote him a letter, he ended by saying: "Farewell, and love us." Apropos of which there is an anecdote about a Frenchman who considered the use of classical phrases a pose which wanted snubbing. He had a friend who always ended his letters with "*Vale et nos ama*," and one day he tore this passage off his friend's letter and returned it to him with the words: "*Voyagez, mon ami, voyagez et oubliez*." Yet in France a man "loves" his friend, just as he loves the cheese of Camembert, or the "footing" or the "five-o'clock." People who have studied the classics and who have lived a good deal in France use the word "love" very readily and nobody sees anything doubtful in it. In the same way a Frenchman may call you "*mon cher*," but if an Englishman, who may be steeped in Gallicisms, were to address you as "My dear," the Frank Lockwoods of this world would see all kinds of evil in it. I quite admit that most Englishmen have a repugnance for this kind of thing, and I remember how indignant I was when, visiting an old schoolfellow in Sorrento, he fell on my neck and kissed me twice on the face. One's insularity will assert itself.

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I saw very little of Oscar Wilde after 1892, and was content to know that he had "arrived" and was prospering. Being in Paris and very busy, I rarely went to London. I occasionally met him in Paris and was glad to see the French papers begin to take him very seriously. His movements were chronicled. He had become a *personnage*. But the French had little appreciation of his genius. They treated him rather as a fashionable man of the world. His appearances at mundane restaurants were recorded. A sensational article in the *Echo de Paris*, entitled "Elle et Lui," described him *en tête-à-tête* at luncheon *chez* Durand with a well-known actress. An article I wrote in the *Gaulois* to correct the impression that Oscar Wilde was a mere butterfly, and to point out his great literary value, was a real surprise to Paris. "Who then is ce Monsieur Oscar Wilde?" was a question on the boulevard, and before he published my monograph the editor of the *Gaulois* asked me if I was *bien sûr* that my man was of any real importance.

I dined with him very shortly before the débâcle, at his house in Tite Street. I found him very spoiled. Already, before then, he had indicated that he was beginning to attach an exaggerated importance to himself. The

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McClures of *McClure's Magazine* had asked me to give them an article about him, "with as many Oscariana as possible." I had sent their letter to Wilde. In the old days he would have been glad of the publicity, and still more glad to give me the opportunity of doing some highly remunerated work which would have attracted great attention in America. He wrote back very curtly that he considered the letter of the McClures an impertinence and that he would certainly not supply any "Oscariana" unless he were paid to do so, mentioning the sum of twenty pounds as his fee for an interview.

In my *Story of an Unhappy Friendship*, I find the following passage referring to this period :—

"I fancy that in his splendour our friendship relaxed. Possibly it was because we so rarely met. There was a feeling on my side of having been cast off, although there was little to warrant it. . . . I received no letters from him during this period."

I saw very little of him in his purple days. The stories of his luxurious life, the villas at Goring, the fashionable hotels, the butlers and under-butlers which one heard at the trial were so many revelations to me. "*Que diable allait-il*

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faire dans cette galère?” was a question I asked myself.

At this dinner, at Christmas 1894, he was not himself at all. He exuded unctuous prosperity and reminded me of a Roman emperor of the decadence, Vitellius, indeed, rather than Heliogabalus.

CHAPTER XXIII

Playwriting—"Too easy"—Despises yet desires Popularity—Wilde on Trollope and Besant—The Information against Lord Queensberry—Public Opinion—Paris Unsympathetic—"Ça ne se fait pas"—Alphonse Daudet and British Justice—British Justice and Daudet's *Sapho*—My Visit to Oakley Street—Wilde's Repugnance for Flight—Wilde's Physical Collapse—His Moral Strength—Mr Justice Wills and Sir Frank Lockwood—The Last Scene.

ONE of the very few interesting things that Oscar Wilde said to me during that Christmas dinner at Tite Street in 1894 was in reference to the work he was doing, his play-writing. He said: "It is far too easy," and indeed, what he wrote was written without labour, *currente calamo*. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which George Moore spoke of as the wittiest comedy he had ever seen, was turned out in about a fortnight. He seemed to attach no importance at all to this part of his work, whereas as regards *Salomé* and *Dorian Gray*, on both of which he worked hard, he indicated the satisfaction that an artist feels at the successful accomplishment of a task which has demanded great sacrifices. For easy work Wilde seems to have had as much contempt as Zola. He once

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disclaimed any desire to be a popular novelist. "It is far too easy," he wrote. At the same time he was certainly anxious to see *Dorian Gray* a popular success, and there is extant a letter of his to Messrs Ward, Lock & Co., expressing this desire and suggesting means for "booming" the book.

It distressed me to see that Wilde's success had not only not brought him any happiness, but seemed to have laden him with care and anxiety. There may have been hanging over him a sense of disaster, but the probability is that he was merely worried by his debts, for the large income that he was making by no means sufficed for his increased extravagances. He spoke with a certain amount of self-reproach, but to that one was accustomed. He seemed to think that a writer ought to be methodical and laborious, and earn his reputation with the sweat of his brow. Yet of the laborious and methodical he always used to speak with a certain contempt. He used to hold up Trollope as an example of what the man of letters should not be, and as to Sir Walter Besant, that business man amongst novelists, he used to criticise in him the fact that "he goes up to the City every day with a little bag."

There is no doubt, too, that at this time Oscar

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Wilde was "doing himself" far too well. It occurred to me, more than once during dinner, that he was *en route* for a stroke of apoplexy. The veins in his forehead were swollen and pigmented, his breathing was oppressed and his adiposity had enormously increased. I think it certain that his imprisonment prolonged his life, for it interposed two years of abstinence, and indeed when he came out of prison he was in greatly improved health. I never saw him looking better than one day when we were taking a country walk at Berneval. And I certainly never saw him looking worse than in his prosperity on the occasion of that last dinner in Tite Street.

I had no communications from him in the early part of 1895. I knew nothing of the Queensberry business until I saw the account in the papers, and until then I had had no idea that there was any quarrel between Oscar Wilde and the Marquess. He had never said anything about it; indeed he had never mentioned Lord Queensberry's name. On reading the newspaper report of the proceedings at Bow Street, I was dismayed. The whole business seemed so utterly unlike what the Oscar whom I had known would have engaged in. Some sinister influence had obviously been at work. For

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a man who was so versed in Parisianism to run to the police for protection against another gentleman! *Ça ne se fait pas*. And this, Oscar Wilde recognised and admitted when he had come to his senses in Wandsworth Gaol. Nor was it difficult to foresee from the very first what was likely to be the outcome of a contest between a Queensberry and a Wilde, between a nobleman of the most tremendous family interest, and with the command of enormous wealth, in the resources of his friends and relations, and a writer, who was in debt and had no resources beyond the production of his pen. Lord Alfred Douglas has described to me, in a letter, his family's influence as "huge," saying that he was going to try and get Oscar "out"—the letter was written when Wilde was in gaol—he added that if he, Alfred Douglas, were "in," his family would very soon get *him* out. As no doubt they would have been able to do. I know that I was so distressed and alarmed at what I read in the papers that I broke a long silence, and from Paris sent Oscar Wilde a telegram of encouragement. It was no use then to upbraid him. I had no answer from him, and I heard nothing about him except what I read in the papers. He was evidently enjoying his rôle as a prosecutor, and the huge publicity that

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attended it. The utter unconsciousness with which he was acting at the time became apparent when it was announced that Mr Wilde had left England for a trip to Monte Carlo, at the very time when he ought to have been in England preparing for a prosecution which he knew was to be nothing but his own defence against the most serious charges. From the very first one noticed that public opinion was against him. The magistrate at Bow Street Police Court who heard the case against Lord Queensberry, Mr Newton, from the first showed that he had little sympathy with the prosecutor. On Mr Newton's own initiative, Lord Queensberry was accommodated with a seat outside the dock, and Oscar Wilde's answer to almost the first question that was put to him brought forth a rebuke from the Bench. In answer to the question : " Are you a dramatist and an author ? " Wilde answered : " I believe I am well known in that capacity." " Only answer the questions, please," came at once from Mr Newton. In the meanwhile, the magistrate had very properly ordered Lord Alfred Douglas, who had accompanied Wilde to Bow Street in the carriage and pair, to leave the Court immediately. Before Wilde signed his depositions, he requested that a part of them should be read over again to him. " If you would just

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attend, this would not have happened," came testily from the Bench. I remember saying to a well-known Londoner, who was with me in Paris, when I was reading over the account of the Police Court proceedings: "I wonder why Newton seems so down on Oscar Wilde?" "Perhaps he knows a bit," was the ominous answer.

It was reported in Paris that the Monte Carlo hotelkeeper to whose house Wilde and his friend first went had refused to receive them. I do not know whether this is true, but the fact that the story was current shows what public feeling was. Everybody seemed to think, and said so, that Wilde had encompassed his own ruin. The Marquess, who till then had not been very popular, became a hero. It was a terrible time for Wilde's friends, even for those who, like myself, had not the slightest idea of what defence Lord Queensberry would put up, and were ignorant of the way in which Oscar Wilde had compromised himself. All the English journalists in Paris exulted when the Queensberry case broke down, though I do not think that one of them knew Oscar Wilde, or had any reason to wish him harm. The Parisians also showed little sympathy. Those were pre-Alliance days and before the *entente cordiale* had been heard

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of, and the French were never sorry when some scandal broke out in England to show the world that our vaunted British virtue was not what we professed. Even Alphonse Daudet, most sympathetic and kindly of men, who had a great friendship for me, and knew of my affection for Wilde, did not hesitate to express the hope that severe justice might be done. The English colony, perhaps because they resented Wilde's conduct in giving the French an opportunity to ridicule British morality, was more than blood-thirsty. "I want to see the man get twenty years," was a remark that I often heard, long before Wilde had been tried.

When Wilde was sentenced and I had told the result of the trial to Alphonse Daudet, who was then staying at Brown's Hotel, in Dover Street, he expressed great approval. "That shows the good sense of the English," he said. I have often wondered since whether the attitude of the "trade" and of the public towards the novel of his of which he was most proud, and which he considered a moral lesson—namely, *Sapho*, a book which has been dramatised by Cain and Bernède and set to music, as libretto to an opera by Massenet, and which in England is considered an obscene book, even more objectionable than most of Zola's works—would have

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modified this view of his of our national good sense. Only a very short while ago a bookseller in Queensland was prosecuted and heavily fined for selling an English version of this book, which Daudet considered so much a moral lesson that he dedicated it: "*À mes fils lorsqu'ils auront vingt ans,*" a dedication which it is true Paris immediately paraphrased into: "*À mes fils lorsqu'ils auront vingt francs.*"

Oscar Wilde was much surprised and distressed to see how unpopular was his cause and what detestation of himself seemed prevalent. I referred him, for an explanation, to one of the sayings de la Rochefoucauld, who very aptly enunciates the instinctive maliciousness of men. If one is always more or less pleased at the downfall of a friend, how much more so will not one be at the disaster of a man who has outstripped everybody and who seems to be entering upon a career of unparalleled success.

Not very long after Oscar Wilde had been released on bail I received a telegram asking me to come over to London "to take Wilde *into* the country." I imagined that this message had a veiled meaning and crossed over at once. But the telegram meant exactly what it said. It was thought that it would be a good thing for Wilde to go into the country or up

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the river, or somewhere, while awaiting his second trial, and I had been selected to accompany him. Wilde apparently was unaware of the proposed arrangement, and when I found him in bed in Oakley Street, a nervous wreck, he declared that he was far too ill to go anywhere. The question of flight was mooted, but it never had his sympathy. "I can't see myself slinking about the Continent," he said, "a fugitive from justice." However, he left the matter in the hands of his friends, and one day there was a long consultation on the subject, to which I was not admitted, my own views being too well known, and considered too anarchistic to be practical. As this meeting was held at the house of one of the men who had backed Stewart Headlam, when he bailed Wilde, and who had no desire whatever to lose the money he had at stake, the decision was a foregone conclusion, in spite of the fact that Lord Douglas of Hawick, who was much more heavily involved, had given Wilde *carte blanche* to act as he thought best to his interests.

I saw a great deal of Wilde during the period between 10th and 25th May, spending most of my time in his company at Oakley Street. He was in a terrible nervous condition, and seemed to me to be sickening of some kidney

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trouble, for his thirst was unquenchable and he was drinking all the time, water, milk and soda, lemonade and other innocuous fluids. Though greatly preoccupied, he kept himself in excellent control. I never heard a recrimination pass his lips. He was more than ever gentle and kindly to everybody who came into contact with him. His considerate good nature rose superior to the bitterness that his fate might have engendered. I think he showed finer than I had ever seen him, on the very last night of all, the night of 24th May, which preceded the last day of his trial. There was an extraordinary calm and dignity about him. His attitude, while I admired it, distressed me, for he seemed to me to anticipate what did happen, and what we all dreaded, and acted like a man who is taking a last farewell of life.

His attitude in Court during his last trial shows the enormous moral strength of the man. Before he went to the Old Bailey to surrender he was a complete wreck. In Court he showed himself as mentally active as ever. Sir T. Marchant Williams records his impression that, "intellectually speaking, Wilde stood head and shoulders above the judges who tried him, and the counsel who prosecuted him." The impression that I received in Court—I only

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attended there on the last day—was that a pack of mongrel terriers were worrying a wounded lion, and I felt heartily ashamed of myself for being there at all.

We have, from a man who was in Court all through the last trial, the following pen-pictures of the prisoner on the succeeding days: "On May 22nd," we read, "Mr Wilde reached the Court early, in company with his sureties and took a seat at first on the usher's bench below the jury-box, opposite his leading counsel, Sir Edward Clarke. Wilde looked haggard and ill, and his hair, which generally had a slight natural wave and was usually parted neatly down the middle, was in some disorder." Indeed, he looked so ill that a report was current in London on the Wednesday, a report which reached his friends at Oakley Street, that he had been taken ill in the dock. There was no truth in this, and on the whole, when Wilde returned that night he seemed more cheerful and in better spirits than when he had left in the morning. The next day he is described as "obviously much enfeebled and upset by the experiences he had been through. In the dock he sat with his head resting on his arms, a position which bespoke unutterable weariness."

That was the day on which Justice Wills

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pitchforked Shelley's evidence back to where it belonged, and withdrew the charge connected with him from the jury. This was a great score for the defence and annoyed the prosecution so much that the Solicitor-General was heard to speak of Mr Justice Wills, in consequence, as "an old fool." It is recorded that "Excitement in Court was intense when the Judge intimated his intention of withdrawing from the jury the counts dealing with Shelley which had been universally regarded as the strongest against the accused. Wilde for the first time sat up erect." That night we were all more hopeful at Oakley Street. Wilde, though pleased that his innocence had been established on this count, was terribly nervous about the cross-examination which he was to undergo on the morrow, at the hands of Sir Frank Lockwood. "I am not fit to be cross-examined," he said to me. "Sir Frank will do what he likes with me. He will turn me inside out." I told him that he had nothing to fear and assured him that he would come through the ordeal as successfully and with as much credit to himself as he had done on the two previous occasions.

It is certain that he was looking very ill in Court next day, so much so that Sir Edward Clarke was able to make a point by drawing

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attention to his condition. "The defendant," he said, in his opening speech for the defence, "broken as he is now, as anyone who saw him at the first trial must see he is, by being kept in prison without bail—contrary to practice, and, as I believe, contrary to law—will submit himself again to the indignity and pain of going into the witness-box. Unfit as he is after the ordeal he has gone through, he will repeat on oath his denial of the charges which have been made against him."

Wilde looked so poorly that Sir Edward asked for permission for him to be seated while giving his evidence. "His voice, at the first trial so full and confident, had become hollow and husky. He seemed glad to lean over the front of the witness-box for support."

When Sir Frank Lockwood rose to cross-examine him, Wilde stood up. He looked so ill that even Sir Frank took some pity on him. "Don't rise, please, unless you wish," he said. But Wilde remained standing. "I can hear better," he said. After a very short time, however, he sank back into his seat. The cross-examination, it is needless to say, was protracted and pitiless. The Treasury was out to kill, and poor Wilde was, as they say in Arizona, their meat. The whole of this last trial was

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not creditable to the English administration of justice. Sir Edward Clarke had plenty of reason for his complaints about its unfairness. The device of trying Taylor first was obviously intended to prejudice the second jury against Wilde. Otherwise why did the Treasury so strongly insist on the prisoners being taken in that order? Charges were brought against Wilde which even the Judge stigmatised as unfair.

Mr Justice Wills, though it may be said that on the whole he impartially tried the case, certainly did not conceal which way his private opinion went.

“It was remarked,” writes a man who was present during the trial, “in more than one instance that the Judge, while placing two issues before the jury in fair enough language, yet imparted to his delivery, his tones and his manner, a significance which deprived his statements of that appearance of impartiality which is usually expected of the Bench.”

Very possibly he felt his own intellectual inferiority to the prisoner at the bar, and resented it. He certainly went out of the way to boast that he had not been at the University, and that he could not see the extreme beauty of Wilde's language. He was very ferocious in

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manner when passing sentence and seemed to spit his words out at the prisoners. At the same time, he was obviously in a very nervous condition. I heard that directly after the trial, so greatly had the details of it shocked him, he was taken seriously ill, and had to go away for a rest and change. During that period he received from abroad a number of insulting post cards from one of Wilde's friends, who may have hoped to serve the prisoner by insulting the Judge.

I was in Court on the last day of all. I arrived just after the summing-up. I asked a barrister friend of mine how Wills had gone, and he said: "Most deadly. Dead against the prisoner." He added that all chance was lost. "Still," as I wrote some years ago, "the jury were a long time in discussion, and each minute strengthened hope. After a long while (two hours) we heard a bell, an usher came bustling in, and a great silence fell upon the buzzing Court. In was the silence of a beast of prey which, to seize its victim, opens a yawning mouth, and perforce suspends its roar. But it was a false alarm. The jury had sent a question to the Judge."

It had been reported that the tenor of this question prompted Sir Frank Lockwood to

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remark to Sir Edward Clarke: "You'll dine your man in Paris to-morrow." I was sitting directly behind the Solicitor-General, and what he did say was: "That means an acquittal." But Sir Edward shook his head mournfully. "No, no, no," he said.

"Thus do they compliment each other," I whispered to my neighbour. The Treasury Counsel overheard my remark and turned round with a mighty face suffused with joviality. He was amused, no doubt, to find that a layman appreciated at their just value the little compliments which advocates pay to each other. But I had heard that kind of prediction before. I travelled up to town with Montague Williams and the Attorney-General on the last day but one of the Lefroy murder trial at Lewes. Williams had made his speech for the defence. "You've got that fellow off," said Mr Attorney; and "No, no," said Williams; "wait for the Judge." I thought that Lockwood seemed a very jolly fellow and I could not understand the animosity with which he had conducted the prosecution. I understood it still less when I heard afterwards that Sir Frank Lockwood was a personal friend of Oscar Wilde, a frequent visitor to his house, and that he had been there even after the libel proceedings had begun. I did not, of

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course, know that one of the men whose name was frequently mentioned as being an associate of the prisoner was a nephew of Sir Frank Lockwood.

The jury deliberated for over two hours and finally brought in a verdict of "Guilty" on every single count. A glance at their faces had been sufficient to tell me which way they had gone. I noticed that while they were taking their seats the Judge's hand shook as in a palsy, as he arranged his papers on the desk. Then he fumbled in one of his pockets. "He's looking for the black cap," whispered some wag behind me. And indeed it was a death sentence, a sentence of cruel death, that he was about to pronounce. I looked at poor Oscar when the Judge was passing sentence, and his face was what I shall never forget. "It was flushed purple, the eyes protruded, and over all was an expression of extreme horror. When the Judge had finished speaking, and whilst a whirl of satisfaction buzzed through the Court, Wilde, who had recovered himself, said: 'And I? May I say nothing, my lord?' But the Judge made no answer—only an impatient sign with his hand to the warders. These touched my poor friend on the back. He shuddered and gave one wild look round the Court. Then he

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turned and lumbered forward to the head of the stairs, which led to the bottomless pit. He was swept down and disappeared.”

That same evening at Wandsworth Gaol there was a struggle between a convicted prisoner and the warders, who wished to force him to take a bath in filthy water. That prisoner was Oscar Wilde.

CHAPTER XXIV

Oscar Wilde in Prison—The Alleviations that he found—“Prison calms”—The Effect on his Health—My First Visit to Wandsworth—On Oakum-picking—The Magistrate’s Two Ounces—A Universal Outcry—Action of the Home Office—Oscar Wilde under Observation—What the Doctors saw—One Good Result of Wilde’s Sufferings—The Article in *La Revue Blanche*—On the Exhaustion of the Brain—The Similar Case of Willie Wilde—Wilde revisited—A Necessary Correction.

OSCAR WILDE has given in *De Profundis* some indication of his state of mind after his conviction and definite return to gaol. He tells us that he had constantly in his mind the thought of suicide. I do not, however, believe that he ever had the serious intention of committing such an act; for one thing, the means were wanting; for another, he was very closely watched. And then again, whatever his hopes of acquittal may have been, he must have been prepared for what happened. Public prejudice was so strong against him that there was no possibility of an escape. This had been pointed out to him, and I believe that he expected to be convicted, though he did not anticipate receiving so severe a sentence. I had told him that it would be self-deception to expect anything but a con-

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viction if he stayed on in England, and then he said: "What do you think the sentence will be?" "Why, the maximum of course," I answered: "two years' hard labour." "Oh, not two years, Robert," he said pathetically, as though I had anything to do with it. "Not two years. I could not stand two years." Again, before his trial he had spent a long time in prison, "most unjustly," as Sir Edward Clarke pointed out. Unjust no doubt it was, but, as things turned out, it was a good thing for him. It accustomed him to confinement, to the loss of liberty, to the absence of tobacco and extreme abstemiousness in the use of alcohol. The association with criminals would, to a man of his instinctive anarchism, be no terror at all. He was quite sincere when he said that he cared nothing about social distinctions. He would probably consider the men whom he met in the prison corridors and in the exercise-ground very much more interesting, and not less "respectable," than the majority of the people whom he used to meet outside. And as a writer he would find delight in the exercise of his powers of observation. As an Irishman he would see much less disgrace in imprisonment than an Anglo-Saxon; he would enjoy the interest shown in him, and the deference paid towards

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him, as a criminal *de marque*, by warders and prisoners, and as a man of wide reading he would remember that many men, his intellectual peers, had suffered far worse duress than his.

He would think of Tolstoy and sense his indifference to the discomforts of the life and his utter contempt for what disgrace the world might see in imprisonment under a *bourgeois* regime. He would remember Dostoievsky and his knout-scarred back, Dostoievsky and his House of the Dead, compared with which Wandsworth Gaol was a comfortable abode, and possibly he might remember a passage in *Crime and Punishment*, where the examining magistrate bids Raskolnikoff not to dread prison, for "prison calms the culprit." For the rest, for his calm the prison doctors would provide. He slept a deep sleep that first night in Wandsworth Gaol and on subsequent nights. During the daytime he wondered at the dullness of his sensations. The anticipated mental agony had none of the acuteness he had dreaded. The whole thing seemed like an evil dream, but objective rather than subjective. I fancied that this would be so, and on my first visit to the prison, as I was coming away from the *parloir*, I said to the warder: "Bromides, I suppose?" And "Buckets of it," said the warder.

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It is a curious circumstance, and testifies to his inherent histrionism, that his principal suffering, a moral one, seems to have been caused by having to wear the hideous and grotesque costume that English prisoners are dressed in. It will be remembered how he wrote to Smithers : “ The horror of prison-life is the contrast between the grotesqueness of one’s aspect and the tragedy of one’s soul.” He refers to the same thing both in *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

One has always tried to console oneself about his prison-life with the reflection that, as he undoubtedly improved in health while he was confined, and that as he always attached far more importance to the physical than to the mental, both as regards comfort and suffering, he may very likely have endured less than one supposed. When a man feels himself getting better and better, he cannot be altogether unhappy, and as against the hideousness of his zany attire, he could set for consolation the fact that his stoutness decreased gradually. He would derive real satisfaction from this, for he dreaded more than anything a fulness of habit. When he went to prison he was indeed getting “ fatter and fatter.” When he came out, his figure was an excellent one. The fat had disappeared, and his muscle had developed.

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With regard to his far greater dread for physical than for mental suffering, I have often heard him express himself to that effect. "It was physical pain, so much worse than anything mental," he often said. He took the greatest care of himself. During all the years that I knew him, I never once saw him ill or in pain of any kind. In one of his letters he speaks of having suffered from a severe attack of asthma; but I never heard of it, and fancy it must have been invented as an excuse for not doing something that his correspondent wanted. Ransome attributed to him a certain disease, and added that it was the final cause of his death. I see that, in his new edition, Mr Ransome omits this indiscretion. I can only say that, during the seventeen years, I never saw in Wilde the slightest sign of a malady which has a very distinct way of announcing its existence, a disease which certainly does not hide its fatal light under any bushel whatsoever. The fact is, the man had a wonderful constitution, just as he had a wonderful brain.

My first visit to him at Wandsworth was on 25th August, when, in the hideous prison parlance, he "was due" for his first quarterly visit. The ticket entitled two friends to visit the prisoner, but, not being in touch with Ross at

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the time, I could find nobody to go with me. I must have said something about this, because I find amongst my letters one of rebuke from Alfred Douglas, who says that it is absurd of me to say that I could find nobody to come to the prison with me, when there were hundreds of Wilde's friends who would have only been too glad of the opportunity. No doubt ; only they did not come forward. Wilde seemed very much broken, but what he complained of most, was that he was allowed only one book a week to read. Later on, under a more humane governor elsewhere, he was allowed a sufficiency of literature and his friends were permitted to send books to the prison for him, the only stipulation being, that these should remain the property of the prison library. He told me that he was reading Newman and Pater, but he spoke without enthusiasm. We looked at each other and simultaneously burst into a painful laugh. At that time, he was picking oakum for his task, and his nails were broken and bleeding. This oakum-picking is a cruel task. A hard-labour prisoner is bound under penalties to pick four pounds of the tarred rope in his "darg." It is impossible for anybody but the most skilled, the very old prison "lag." That this is so I tested one day. There was a magistrate friend of mine

22 Bradmore Road.

Wednesday.

My dear Wilde,

Can you come to
tea with me tomorrow at
4 o'clock, or any time later
you like? I have been ill
and confined to the house,
but am better today. I have
been much disappointed
not to have seen you before
now. Very sincerely yours

W. H. Pater.

*Facsimile of a Letter from Walter Pater to Oscar Wilde, who had an intense admiration for him. Pater is said to have suggested some improvements in *Dorian Gray*. Oscar Wilde used to read Pater in prison

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who used to hand out sentences of hard labour without realising to what he was condemning the prisoners. One day after visiting the local workhouse, where oakum-picking is one of the tasks imposed on the casuals—who, more fortunate in this respect than the convicts, do get some satisfaction out of the nasty stuff, by smoking it, *faute de mieux*, in their pipes—I brought home a handful of the raw material, and asked my friend to see what he could make of it. He lent himself to the experiment, and picked away diligently for half-an-hour. He was a man very quick with his fingers. At the end of half-an-hour, his nails beginning to break and the tips of his fingers becoming sore, he declared that he had had more than enough of the task; “but look,” he added, pointing to a large pile of the fluffy fibre, “what a heap I have managed to pick.” I asked him to come with me into the kitchen, where I commandeered the domestic scales. The big heap of picked oakum on which the worthy J.P. had been working his very hardest for thirty minutes weighed very much less than two ounces!

I recorded that I found Oscar Wilde in a terrible state of suffering, and this announcement, on my part, brought me the approval of Alfred Douglas, who wrote me to say that it was

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the right thing to tell the truth, that he was sick of hearing people say that Oscar was "bearing up wonderfully," and things of that sort. "Of course, I know," he wrote, "that he is in hell, and it is well that people should know it also." I visited Wilde again a few weeks later, and had a long interview with him, in a private room, and not the vault-like crypt where I had first seen him; nor were there any double rows of bars between us. He seemed then much better in health and spirits, and as he was quite *au courant* with the news of the day I gathered that he had at last been able to learn of the resources of the prison and to make use of them. In the meanwhile, his friends were agitating for his release. The Parisian Press, which had shown him scant mercy at the time of his trial, saw in his prison sufferings an opportunity—I repeat that this was before the days of the *entente cordiale*—to attack *la perfide Albion*, and did not spare its criticisms of the barbarity of "le har' laboore," as they pronounced it. The Parisian *littérateurs*, headed by Mr Stuart Merrill, sent in petitions. The American special correspondents sent over sensational accounts of how Wilde was being tortured to death. The authorities at the Home Office seem to have realised what the outcry would be if Wilde died in gaol, and, though they

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steadfastly refused to consider any question of reducing his sentence, they recommended C.3.3. to the special attention of the prison doctor and governor.

I think that Wilde would have had a better chance of some alleviation of his sentence if it had not been for the misguided championship not only of some of his friends, but of certain people who, believing him guilty, started an insane campaign to prove that what they called "the Greek movement" had no essence of criminality in it, that it was pure Philistinism to object to it, and that, if guilty, Wilde should be considered a martyr to Puritanical prejudice.

For my part, I considered with the gravest apprehension any attempts to palliate his guilt, if indeed he were guilty, which I did not and could not believe. When I heard that Lord Alfred Douglas was projecting an article in *La Revue Blanche* which—as I understood—was to defend Wilde on æsthetic grounds, I was so seriously alarmed as to what the consequences might be to the prisoner that I telegraphed to the editor, whom I happened to know, following up my telegram with a long letter, in which I pointed out how ill Wilde's interest would be served by the publication of any such article. This brought me a long abusive letter from

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Alfred Douglas, to which, in his book, he refers as my "proper answer." He then told me that he had withdrawn the article. Eventually an article did appear, very much more mischievous, to my thinking, than the one originally projected. As to this article, Alfred Douglas has since disclaimed all responsibility, attributing it to the imagination of some journalist who interviewed him, and "faked" his answers. I may dismiss the subject by mentioning that I have a manuscript document referring to this article, but in view of the laws of copyright, I prefer not to reproduce it.

The prison doctor put Wilde in the infirmary, and reported in such a way to the Home Office that a further examination of the prisoner was deemed expedient. The report was that there was some danger lest the man's mind might be affected by the strain upon him. In consequence, two experts were sent down from the Home Office to "observe" Wilde. Now, on the afternoon when these two pathologists came to the prison, Oscar Wilde happened to be in one of his cheerful moods. Delighting as always in an appreciative audience, he was entertaining his fellow-patients in the infirmary ward with his jokes and anecdotes, and a jolly time was in progress, while the two experts were watching the

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prisoner through the "observation" spy-hole. Some doctors might have found in this spectacle some cause for alarm—a man of high social standing, and the most brilliant intellect, taking obvious pleasure in amusing a collection of petty criminals—just as judges and juries had seen criminality in the same man for delighting in similar audiences when at large. But men are always more prone to condemn than to absolve, and the result was, that the experts, without any further inquiry, returned to Whitehall to announce that Wilde was perfectly sane, and seemed quite happy. No doubt the fresh proof that he had afforded of his taste for low and criminal company was duly noted against him. When eventually a petition was prepared by "some eminent persons in high positions in the Church and the learned professions, whose calling and character placed them beyond the suspicion of having any prejudice in favour of the prisoner, or of any laxity of view with regard to offences of the kind for which Wilde was convicted," in which special stress was laid upon the danger to the man's mentality, an intimation was received from the Home Secretary that it would be useless to present it, as "the case of this prisoner has been the subject of careful inquiry and consideration, and that as a result

The
Ballad of Reading Gaol
By
C. 3. 3.

Leonard Smithers
Royal Arcade London W
Mdeccxcviii

First Edition, 1898

The
Ballad of Reading Gaol
By
C. 3. 3.
[Oscar Wilde]

Leonard Smithers and Co
5 Old Bond Street London W
Mdecccxcix

Seventh Edition, 1899

THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

Reduced facsimiles of the title-pages (8¾ by 5½ in.)

The
Ballad of Reading Gaol
By
C. 3. 3.
[Oscar Wilde]

Leonard Smithers
London
Mdecccxcix

Pirated Edition [1904]

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the Home Secretary has come to the conclusion that no grounds, medical or other, exist which would justify him in advising any mitigation of the sentence."

One good result—and Oscar Wilde would have been delighted to know of it—that came from the universal outcry against the barbarities of "*le hard labour*," was that the attention of the authorities was at last drawn to the report of the Departmental Committee on Prisons, which recommended that "the power to earn remission of sentence should be extended from convict to local prisons." This has now been done, and there is no doubt that poor Wilde's sufferings helped to bring this about. I think that one of the few serious purposes he had in life when he left prison was to try to do something to reform the English prison system. His letters to *The Daily Chronicle*, his *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, much in *De Profundis*, are evidence of this, and to some extent effected his purpose. He may have been projecting some book exclusively on this subject, for some time after his death his landlord showed me the books he had left behind him, and amongst these was a copy of John Howard's work, and various magazines in which there were articles on prison-life in England.

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That nothing came of this purpose, as nothing came of all his other purposes of work, has been malevolently attributed to the life he was constrained to lead after he left prison. It is said that he did not work because he was drinking. The terrible fact is, that he was drinking because he could not work. He was seeking in the palpable hell of being unable to produce, because his brain was exhausted, the artificial paradise that alcohol affords. He was in need of money, how badly is shown by Lord Alfred Douglas's narrative how he supplied him with food and cash during the last year of his life. He could have earned a good income, for theatre managers offered him commissions, indeed one very well-known man came specially over to Berneval to try to induce him to write a play for his theatre, but the poor fellow simply could not produce. He had outlived his mental powers, as many men of the greatest intellect do. I think that it was because this had been observed already then, that the ancients declared that those whom the gods love die young. Napoleon wore himself out in exactly the same way, and at about the same age, and Napoleon has never been accused of intemperance. This must have been Wilde's greatest suffering: to realise that he was finished. A long period of anxiety,

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during which the hapless brain, diverted from its ordinary functions, never rests, produces this effect. For Napoleon there had been the French campaign and the broodings at Elba. During two years in prison, Wilde's brain had been driven beyond powers of recuperation. It may be noted that Willie Wilde suffered in the same way towards the end of his life. Once the most brilliant and most fertile writer, to whom production was as delightful as it was easy, in the last years he simply was unable to produce, and writhed in despair as this fact forced itself upon him. I often think, when meditating on the mental collapse of the Wilde brothers, of that story of Alphonse Daudet's: *The Man with the Brain of Gold*. It tells of a man whose head was full of gold, who when he wanted to spend money had but to dig his fingers into his brain, and who for some time led a life of splendour and opulence. As time went on the supply became less abundant . . . in the end the scrapings which he could with difficulty obtain were tinged with blood.

There was a great change for the better in Wilde's appearance and manner after Major Nelson took over the direction of Reading Gaol. I considered the governor to whom he succeeded very, very—well, unsuitable for a prison governor.

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I remember once meeting him in the yard after with a friend I had left the visiting-room. My friend suggested that I should speak to him, and ask him how Wilde was getting on. I told him that I surely could not muster up the courage to address him, he looked so very bristly. Then my friend went up to him, and a sarcastic counter-interrogation was all the answer he got to his question.

On another occasion when I was with the same friend in the visiting-room, which was divided into a double row of hutches, one row being for the prisoners, and the other for their friends, Wilde asked me if I would mind retiring as he wished to speak in private with my companion. I fancy now it must have been about *De Profundis*, but my companion never mentioned what it was—and I, of course, never asked him. I refer to this because, in my book, *The Story of an Unhappy Friendship*, I allude to this incident as follows :—“ On this occasion he asked me to absent myself for a few moments, while he talked to the gentleman who had come with me. And in the grey gloom of the prison corridor, where I waited till this conference, from which I was excluded, was over, it dawned upon me that my long friendship, fruitful as it had been in sorrow, might reserve for the future another

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sorrow, and the disappointment of a wasted effort." At the time that I wrote that I knew nothing about *De Profundis*, and could not imagine what Wilde might want to speak about in private, unless to ask for news of unworthy associates. I am glad of the opportunity of correcting the false impression that my words may have produced.

The visits to Reading were painful in the extreme, but I loved going there, and Wilde knew this. One day, shortly before he "was due" for another visit, I received a letter from him in which he said: "It is important that two friends should visit me at Reading on the occasion of my next 'At Home,' and so, as I know how disappointed you will be, I have obtained permission from the Governor to write you this special letter, and hope you will take it as a compensation." I was not only glad to go there, but I did not mind people knowing that I went there, with the result, of course, that many unpleasant things were said about me in the papers.

I did not have the privilege of meeting him when he came out of prison, but met him again, not very long afterwards, at Dieppe in France.

CHAPTER XXV

Wilde untainted by Prison—A Curious Psychological Fact—Our First Meeting at Dieppe—The Life at Berneval—His Letter to Ross—Wilde and the Detective—Wilde's Literary Market-value—His Financial Position—The *Cacoethes tacendi*—Pathetic Efforts at Self-discipline—His Attempts to Work—Monsieur Dupoirier's Testimony—The *De Profundis* Resolutions—A Pity the Book was not published—Warring Counter-influences.

IT is a curious psychological fact that Oscar Wilde's downfall and "disgrace" did not alter in the slightest degree the feelings of his friends towards him. The mere circumstance that a man has been in prison usually creates around him, whatever one's own opinion of his guilt or responsibility may be, an *aura* to whose repelling power one involuntarily succumbs. I have known several men and women who have got into "trouble," and whom I have visited in gaol, whom, when I afterwards met them, I could not regard with the same respect as before they were imprisoned. I had this absurd feeling about Madame Clovis Hugues, the wife of the poet-deputy, who went to St Lazare for shooting a private inquiry agent of a particularly contemptible species, named Morin, and, even more

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curiously, the gallant Marquis de Morés, for whom I had great personal affection and a strong admiration, always seemed to me in some way besmirched and tainted after I had seen him in the Santé prison, where I frequently visited him. And neither of these people were ever under charges which the French call *infamantes*, while as to the charges against Wilde, society knows none more full of disgrace. In despite of this, the fact that he had "done" two years made absolutely no difference, not only in our conduct, but in our innermost feelings towards him. As far as I am concerned, I might explain this mental attitude of mine by my appreciation of the French poet's line, that it is the crime and not the scaffold which makes for disgrace. But that would not afford a sufficient explanation, for neither in the case of Madame Hugues nor of de Morés did I admit any criminality, and yet I felt differently towards them. And though I saw both these prisoners in gaol, I had not seen them under degrading circumstances. Morés received me in the governor's office, and was dressed like any gentleman in the morning; Madame Hugues "received" me in the *parloir* of St Lazare, and was in her usual clothes. Wilde I had seen behind bars, on several occasions in a kind of rabbit-hutch, with trellis-wire over the

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front of it, dressed in a hideous and repulsive costume, and disfigured as to his face by not being shaved and as to his hands by the condition of disfigurement and maculation to which they had been brought by the barbarous tasks to which he had been forced. So that, while there was nothing degrading to remember about either Madame Hugues or de Morés, one could not but recall in Wilde's presence the conditions under which one had seen him, in prison. Well, yet one never felt that these degrading conditions had in any way degraded him. One remembered him only as figuring in a grotesque rôle in the tragedy of life, and with no more feeling of detraction or compassion than if one had remembered him in some realistic costume at a fancy-dress ball. When, shortly after his release from prison, I received from him from Berneval an invitation to go over and see him his letter gave me as much pleasure, and seemed as much an honour, as if those two years had never been.

I naturally went over at once, and it was outside a café by the old harbour in Dieppe that I met him again as a free man. I confess that my first impression was one of disappointment. He was carelessly dressed, and he wore a Tam-o'-Shanter cap, which did not suit him at all. His face was flushed, and over the men by whom

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he was surrounded at that *terrasse* table hovered an atmosphere of absinthine hilarity. As a matter of fact, during the period between his arrival at Dieppe and my meeting with him there, he had not been living very wisely. There had been banquets to minor French poets, invited *en bloc* from Paris, and other revelries, and the people who were with him, such as Conder and Smithers, were counsellors neither of discretion nor of prudence. But that impression was only momentary, and when we had got away from Dieppe, that provincial metropolis of *la haute noce*, he showed himself quite a different man, and it was there that I at last realised how much prison had done for him, both physically and morally. He was genial and kindly and alert, and the man who told Carson that he "never walked" had become fond of long pedestrian excursions in the neighbourhood, and of other exercise also. I remember watching him swim with great vigour. His re-acquired taste for riding—and later on, in Italy, he went out often on horseback—is another sign that prison had galvanised into life his torpid muscular system.

Lord Alfred Douglas talks about the "breezy, brotherly, beautiful Berneval days," and implies that all of Wilde's friends lived there with him

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as long as his funds lasted, having "a good time." There is as little truth in this statement as there is in most of his amazing book. Already, a very short time after his release from prison, Wilde was financially embarrassed. Robert Ross gives two delightful letters from him, written one from Dieppe, on 1st June 1897 (about ten days after his release from prison), and the other from Rome, three years later, letters which give us the real Oscar Wilde, with all his wit and courage and *bonhomie* and erudition. These letters appear at the end of the *Selected Prose* volume, which was published by Methuen at one shilling in 1914. The Rome letter, by the way, opens with a sentence which illustrates that brain paralysis of which I spoke higher up. "I simply cannot write," he says. "It is too horrid, not of me, but to me. It is a mode of paralysis—a *cacoethes tacendi*—the one form that malady takes in me." It is, however, to the Dieppe letter that I wish to refer. It is here that he announces his intention of living at Berneval, and he adds, lower down: "As regards people living on me, and the extra bedrooms: dear boy, there is no one who would stay with me but you, and you will pay your bill at the hotel for meals; and as for your room, the charge will be nominally 2 frcs. 50c. a night,

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but there will be lots of extras, such as *bougie*, *bain* and hot water, and all cigarettes smoked in the bedrooms are charged extra. And if anyone does not take the extras, of course he is charged more :—Bath, 25c. No Bath, 50c. Cigarette in the bedroom, 10c. a cigarette. No cigarette in the bedroom, 20c. for each cigarette. This is the system in all good hotels.”

People who went over to Berneval to visit him took their meals at the hotel. These were rather dear—dear even for Dieppe in the season. But “ Monsieur Melmoth ” had been very lavish during his first days there, and the landlord had been spoiled. “ If I had only three guests like Monsieur Melmoss,” he told me : “ I should have a good season.” I was not well off at the time, and so perforce my visit to my friend was of the briefest. I did not sleep more than three nights under the roof of Wilde’s villa, and I have not the faintest notion what Douglas intends to suggest about Wilde’s friends there. We were annoyed by the presence in the village of an obvious detective, supposed to be in the pay of Lord Queensberry. This detective was the only disturbing element there. Wilde never spoke of any literary projects. I do not think that any allusion was made to the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, and there was only a general idea

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that, in response to a verbal invitation extended to him, by a theatrical manager who had come over from London, he would, as soon as he could settle down, begin work on a play. He was in high spirits, and only very occasionally showed that some bitterness had infiltrated into the benignity of his sweet disposition. He showed no resentment whatever about the detective, but seemed rather to pity him. "*Chacun son métier*," he said. And he certainly never showed that he suffered from his position as was revealed in that letter which he wrote to Smithers from Naples some months later, where, after complaining that certain people to whom he had written had left his letter unanswered he adds: "The fact is that when a man has had two years' hard labour, people quite naturally treat him as a pariah dog—this is a social truth that I realise every day. I don't complain about it. There is no use complaining about facts. *Je constate le fait—c'est tout*. It comes from the decay of the imagination in the race, caused by the pressure of an artificial society and, after all, when my own wife leaves me to die of starvation in Naples, without taking the smallest interest in the matter, I don't see why I should expect old friends to take the trouble to even answer or acknowledge my letters. But let us

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return to the poem: 'There's life in Art, take refuge there,' says Goethe, slightly misquoted."

The bitterness did not seem to be provoked by any recollection of what he had suffered, of his wasted years and the injustice of it all, but by the feeling of conviction that many people for whose opinion he did care might refuse any further association with him, consider him, in fact, to use his own words, "as a pariah dog." I remember how pleased he was when I related to him how I had been with Meredith and Henry James, shortly after he was sent to prison, and with what sympathy he had been spoken about, sympathy devoid of all dissimulation.

I confess that I did not see any signs then of the *cacoethes tacendi* of which he speaks, but I imagined that, though he could make all the money he chose by writing, it would be difficult for him to write under his own name, or even under any pseudonym that might connect the work with him. I was mistaken, as was shown by the way in which the public rushed for the *Ballad*. Meanwhile there had been published in London an anonymous novel, or rather a prolonged short story, which was skilfully advertised in a round-about way as being the work of Oscar Wilde, and which jumped into immediate success. It is true that the book was, of its

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kind, a very clever one, a literary gem indeed, but it is certain that but for the story about its authorship its chances of attracting attention—the publishers being only in a very small way of business, without influence on the reviewers—would have been very slight indeed.

Wilde never spoke to me about his financial position. I understood that he had an income settled on him. It was not until I heard Douglas's counsel in the Ransome trial ridiculing the amount, the two pounds seventeen odd a week, that I knew how little it was. But even had I known it I should have felt no anxiety, for I knew how easily he could work, and the kind of work he could do, and the prices that he ought to be able to command. There was nothing to show the paralysis of which he speaks, the brain exhaustion; and certainly his letters written at the time, as for instance the one of 1st June, to Robert Ross, from which I have quoted a passage, show him as witty, as alert, as amusing as ever.

There is little more pathetic in his after-life than his efforts to discipline himself. He has lost the taste of work, as the French say, and he wants to school himself back into productivity. He thinks—as many unhappy writers have thought before him—that if he can get some

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regular hack work to perform he may be able to serve over again an apprenticeship to the pen. The hack work never came his way; it would have been useless if it had done so, but advantage was taken by dishonest publishers of the fact that this wish of his had become known to pretend that they had afforded him the opportunity that he desired, and that certain hack work, such as translations from the classics, and from certain French authors suspected of pornographic tendencies, was from his pen.

Alfred Douglas paints a sorry picture of the poor man in the last year of his life. We are to imagine him living on his lordship's charity, and spending the Douglas alms in drinking in the cafés. We have in his book an account of Oscar Wilde's day in Paris. He begins his libations at the Grand Café and continues them at the Café Julien. As a matter of fact, during that last year, Oscar was making a frantic effort to earn money. He was working when, physically no less than mentally, he was unfit to do so. I have on this matter the direct evidence of excellent Monsieur Dupoirier, the landlord of the Hôtel d'Alsace, whose veracity I absolutely believe. He did not know what work it was, but that it was not hack work in the ordinary sense of the word is shown by the price paid for it.

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“He used to work at nights,” said Monsieur Dupoirier—“all night long. As a rule he would come in at one o’clock in the morning and sit down to his table, and in the morning he would show me what he had written, and ‘I have earned a hundred francs to-night’ he would say. And he seemed pleased and proud to think that he had earned one hundred francs in one night. But the man who employed him was very irregular about sending him his money, and this used to vex Monsieur Wilde very much. He was always *inquiet* until the payment came, and used to rail against his employer. Towards the end it became very difficult for him to write, and he used to whip himself up with cognac. A *litre* bottle would hardly see him through the night. And he ate little and took but little exercise. He used to sleep till noon, and then breakfast, and then sleep again till five or six in the evening.”

This picture is sad enough, but how different from that painted by his former friend.

In another respect we see him trying to discipline himself also. I mean in his expenditure. He tried to school himself to economy. Just like Ernest Dowson he writes to Smithers, who owes him twenty pounds, and asks to be paid at the rate of five pounds a week. “This will keep me all right,” he says. He does not

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ask for the total amount. He hopes to force himself to live on five pounds a week, just as Dowson hoped to manage on a smaller sum.

We thus see him struggling to the last. He has the *envie de bien faire*, without which a man, as the French saying goes, is indeed lost. He has not degenerated into the alcoholic wastrel as which he has been painted. It is recorded of him that in that last year his conversation was more brilliant than ever. He refuses to perish altogether. We have the testimony of Ernest Lajeunesse how, towards the end: "He tells all his stories in one breath; it is the bitter yet dazzling final piece of a display of super-human fireworks. Those who, at the end of his life, heard him unravel the skein of gold and jewelled threads, the strong subtleties, the psychic and fantastic inventions with which he proposed to sew and embroider the tapestry of the plays and poems which he was going to write . . . will keep the remembrance of a sight at once tragic and lofty."

I think that he was perfectly sincere in the resolutions made in prison, and formulated in *De Profundis*. During the short period in which I saw him after his release from prison he was the man that in that book he announced that he was going to be. I knew nothing then

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of those resolutions, but obviously some strong moral influence had been at work. This influence was that of the long cogitation and final resolve which his prison-book exacted. It is a pity that those parts of that book which we now know, leaving aside the peevish futilities about Alfred Douglas, were not published in his lifetime, for they would have delivered a bond to the world. It is difficult to keep resolutions which have never been enunciated. The public signing of the pledge often saves a man because his *amour-propre* is involved in his mastery of himself. The friar keeps his three vows because everybody who sees him knows that he has taken those three vows. Clandestine resolutions, when everything is warring against their observance, are but poor restraining forces. But not only was *De Profundis* not made public, nobody knew anything about it, except Robert Ross. The very warder who befriended him, and saw him write this work, was ignorant as to what he was writing.

As he told me: "Whilst he was in prison he wrote and wrote, and what he wrote about I never knew, for I always neglected to ask him."

I do not say that, in the main, Wilde broke the secret promises which he had made to himself. He was kindly, compassionate and

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Christian till the end. But the observance of his vow of humility and poverty—which he had frankly accepted—was neglected when he found himself unable to break his new-found habits of extravagance. One has, however, to recall that in Leonard Smithers, most profuse and prodigal of men, he had an almost irresistible tempter ever at his side. Nor would the society of his noble friend from Chantilly, with his “good things,” his *liqueurs variées* and his eleemosynary thousand-franc notes help him towards the peace which those know who limit their desires.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Clemency of Paris—Anglo-Saxon Intolerance—Rencontres with Wilde—My Last Meeting with Him—An Atmosphere of Respect at his Hotel—Refused Admission, but recalled—A Flippant Conversation—The “ Pernodian ” Spring—His Brain as active as ever—His Very Last Word—The Grin of Voltaire—The Verdict of Paris—A Prophecy realised.

FOR a refuge and an abode, Wilde could have chosen no better place than where, after his downfall, he ended his days. Paris is of cities the most clement. Paris has the shortest of memories for men's misdeeds, she judges by the present, not by the past, and religiously observes the law of prescription. In England if a man has once fallen he is not to rise again. There is no amnesty on our side of the Channel. It is a fact that all the insults that were put upon Wilde during his life in Paris were inflicted by his fellow-countrymen. From the French he never suffered even a slight, except possibly as agents for English people, as when a *maître-d'hôtel* begs him to leave a café because *des clients très sérieux* object to his presence there. And even then the enjoinder is delivered with apologies and an appeal to his comprehension of the

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exigencies of business. It is an Englishman who refuses to occupy the same chair at a hair-dresser's which Wilde has just vacated, and blusters out his objection, and his reason for it, so that all the shop may hear. It is a party of Anglo-Saxons who in loud voices ask Madame de Brémont to point out to them Oscar Wilde, who was present in some place of entertainment, "as they were curious to see what sort of a monster he really was." Madame de Brémont, by the way, may be quoted here to give a picture of Wilde as he was in that last year of his life: "He was greatly changed, had grown very stout, and the rich waves of hair had given place to a close-cut coiffure that seemed to accentuate the coarseness of his face. A small white hat added to the grotesque outline of his once beautiful head. He was clad in a suit of grey tweed, the short coat increasing the heavy lines of his figure and giving an impression of overweight to the upper part of his body. Every vestige of the dandy had disappeared. His eyes were heavy and the pallor of the skin added to the look of ill-health, despite his robust figure."

I cannot say that I ever saw him like that. I met him at times in Paris after his return from Naples. He was no longer as friendly as he had

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been formerly, for he seemed to bear some sort of resentment again me, because I had blamed him for going to Naples, which I considered an impolitic act of public defiance. But that he was embittered one could not but see. There was the continual irritation of impecuniosity, for in despite of the fixed income, and Douglas's boundless charities, there were many occasions on which, as he told Gide one night in a café, he was *absolument sans ressources*. Monsieur Dupoirier told me that he found Wilde once *sans domicile* with his baggage held in pawn at the Hôtel Marsollier and advanced the money to release it, while offering Wilde the hospitality of his roof. He writes to Stuart Merrill for a small loan to enable him "to finish the week." Douglas states that he composed many ingenious begging-letters, but gives no proof of the assertion, nor has ever any such letter come to light. Such a condition, combined with that paralysis of the brain, which was so "horrid not of me, but to me," and prevented him from earning money was enough to embitter him. I think that the only occasion on which he ever spoke with real irritation to me was in Paris shortly after his brother's death. I had condoled with him, and I had added: "I hope something will come to you from his affairs." I used the word

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“affairs” in the French sense, and referred to the small entailed estate which Willie Wilde had held, and which I supposed had reverted to his brother on his death. He snapped up the word “affairs.” “What do you mean by ‘affairs’?” he asked, quite angrily, and though I could see that he was offended I could not for the world imagine why. On another occasion I was in the Calisaya Café and looking round saw Wilde seated some way off at a table with Smithers by his side. The picture was not a pleasing one. There was absinthe in front of the two men, but what was more disturbing was the attitude and expression of Smithers. He was proposing something to Wilde which Wilde did not seem inclined to favour, and the picture was a very sordid one of “Temptation.” I knew the kind of proposals that Smithers used to make to needy artists, and I suppose my face expressed some anxiety and some distress. Smithers noticed me looking at them, and whispered something to Wilde, and then they both jumped up and moved to seats outside the café on the boulevard.

At my last meeting with him, however, Wilde was his old self. Not long after Ernest Dowson’s death I was in Paris, and I went to the Hôtel d’Alsace, because I thought Wilde would like

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to hear about it, as he had always had a regard and high esteem for Ernest Dowson. I also remembered how, on a previous occasion, he had written to me to blame me for not going to see him. "I am glad you are so busy," he wrote; "but sorry that you are too busy to come and see me." It was the injustice of a peevish soul.

It pleased me to see with what deference I was received at the Hôtel d'Alsace as a caller on "Monsieur Melmoth." Access to the great man was, however, not a matter of course. "I will send up and see if Monsieur Melmoth receives," said the landlord, and a waiter was despatched. When the man returned and, with a "thousand regrets," informed me that Monsieur was *très fatigué*, far too tired to receive anybody, I wrote a message on a card and sent it up. I was then asked to *monter*. When I reached Oscar's door I found him waiting for me. He caught hold of my two hands and drew me into his room. "I really *am* too tired to speak to anybody to-day," he said: "but I don't like to send *you* away."

The room was a small and gloomy bedroom, which opened out, however, on to a larger chamber, where there was the sun. Oscar was in a dressing-gown, and reminded me of himself



MONSIEUR DUPOIRIER.

MADAME DUPOIRIER.

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seventeen years previously, at the Hôtel du Quai Voltaire. Here again the table was littered with papers; the bowl containing cigarette ends and ashes was not wanting. Some books were heaped up in disorder in a corner. On the mantelpiece was a pile of letters. "I hope you weren't offended," he said, "because I at first refused to see you. I am never any good in the mornings." "I wasn't offended at all," I said. "Monsieur Champfleuri either receives or does not receive." This reference to a famous French *lever de rideau* brought us at once to literary matters. "I see you have here the *Emaux et Camées*," I said, picking up a book; "and there," I added, pointing to a bottle of Pernod absinthe that stood on the washhandstand, "is the Pierian spring that inspired them." "The 'Pernodian' spring, you mean," he said, with a laugh. "But you are quite wrong, for it was de Musset who used absinthe, and these exquisite poems are by Théophile Gautier." It came as quick as lightning, this correction of my mistake, for indeed at the moment I had thought of Alfred de Musset as the author of the poems.

Absinthe and poetry brought me to Ernest Dowson, but Wilde did not seem to care to hear about him. "It is all so sad," he said. "Ernest was an *enfant voué au noir*." Then he added:

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“ Much of what he has written will remain.”

“ You are working too, I see,” I said, pointing to the litter on his table. He answered: “ One has to do something. I have no taste for it now. It is a penance to me, but, as was said of torture, it always helps one to pass an hour or two.” I then said: “ If you never wrote another line, Oscar, you have done enough to ensure your immortality.” And when I said that I knew nothing about *De Profundis*. He seemed really pleased, and brightened. But then his face went all grey again, and I saw him glance towards the stimulant and I was reminded of poor Alphonse Daudet, in the moments just before the morphine syringe was produced and the injection taken. He went and threw himself on the bed, exhausted it seemed, and I rose. “ Come and see me again,” he said, “ though I hardly like to ask people to see me in this room.” He was referring to the poverty of our surroundings. “ Why, I had never noticed it,” I said. “ What does the *mise-en-scène* matter ? ” “ *Qu’importe le verre, pourvu qu’on ait l’ivresse,*” he said. “ You have become reconciled to Sully-Prudhomme, then ? ” I said. I think now that the word *ivresse* was the last word that I heard Oscar Wilde say.

I said “ *A bientôt* ” as I left the room, but I

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did not hear any answer. I felt sad as I went downstairs in the gloomy and malodorous staircase, with the maculated paper hanging from the wall, and through a dirty, glazed door into the bureau. I had expected to find the landlord here, and wanted to ask him about my friend, but the office was empty. In the passage outside was a rack where the keys and the candlesticks of the lodgers were placed, and near this was pasted against the wall those "rules of the establishment" which one sees in all Parisian hotels of this class. "All rents are payable in advance." "In default of payment a *Locataire* may be immediately sent away." Oscar Wilde would see these sordid regulations every time that he lighted his dim candle on his lumbering ascent to the dingy room where I had left him. But, familiar myself with all the phases of the life of which this was the usual *mise-en-scène*, I fancy my sadness must have proceeded from an instinctive feeling that I was to see my friend's face no more. Such an idea did not present itself to me at the time, and as I walked away up the rue des Beaux-Arts and was—a frequent pastime—endeavouring to analyse my feelings, I determined that I was sad because I reproached myself for the flippancy of our interview. We had bantered and chaffed, when perhaps . . .

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But, after all, had we not done well to hasten to laughter, so as not to be forced to weep? On my way home I passed the Hôtel Voltaire and looked up at the first-floor windows, the windows of the suite which Oscar Wilde had occupied in those radiant days, seventeen years previously, in the days when we used to dine with the Duchess, and I was told to bring rhymes from Passy. Far away, at the end of the quay, I caught sight of the statue of Voltaire, who seemed to be looking at me with a sardonic grin, the same grin with which, day by day, and night by night, he would watch poor Oscar's exits and his entrances. There was some comfort in the wicked old man's cynicism, and I turned away hoping that my friend might find it also. It was a grin which ridiculed all illusions, all sentimentality, all beliefs and all hopes, which taught that the only true philosophy is to live as he, Arouet, lived, trusting no one, expecting nothing from God or man, and taking out of life all that one could get by fair means or foul, a philosophy which conducted the sage of Ferney along comfortable and opulent lines to an extreme old age.

During the short time that I remained in Paris on that occasion I took the opportunity of asking people, who were likely to be informed, about Wilde. I certainly did not gather that he had

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acquired a bad reputation. I heard from Henri Bauer that he had been for a long time under close police surveillance, and that the police had stated that on any relapse on his part he would be immediately expelled from France, *par ordre administratif*, which gives the person to whom it is addressed just twenty-four hours in which to leave the territory of the Republic and vouchsafes no reason for the injunction. As Wilde was living peacefully in his hotel, where he was evidently liked and respected by the landlord and servants, who would daily come into contact with the emissaries of the Prefecture—for a detective calls every day of the year at every hotel and lodging-house in Paris—I gathered that there was nothing whatever in his conduct to call for blame or to excite suspicion. At certain cafés I was told that Monsieur Melmoth, “*le grand écrivain*” was a frequent, even regular, client, a fact of which the waiters and *gérants* seemed proud rather than otherwise. Amongst literary people there was a decided feeling of sympathy towards him; only everybody wondered why he chose to live at such a bad address, and why on earth he did not make use of his talents. One great writer, since dead, quoted Balzac to me and said: “*Il passe sa vie à se parler.*” At an important newspaper office I was

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told that he had been invited to collaborate, regularly, a weekly *chronique* at three hundred francs the article.

I left Paris fairly reassured about him, and was able emphatically to contradict in London many slanders that were current about his life in Paris. I told people that he was as strong as ever, and that they might be prepared to see him in a new phase, a reincarnation. "He is only gathering fresh strength," I said. I did expect that something would come from his pen that would set the whole world speaking again of him as Oscar Wilde, C.3.3. being for ever forgotten.

That was indeed to be, but, alas! years after his death, the news of which came to me as a shock and a surprise some months later. The *ivresse* of living was over and done. The *locataire* had received his *cong *, not "in default of payment," but for having paid too much.

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The Real Oscar Wilde

in Dublin. His schoolfellows did not have to ask Wilde who his father was." (This last remark excites the sarcasm of Alfred Douglas.)

An illustration of how she enjoyed astonishing the *bourgeois* is given in the following anecdote about one of her receptions, at which, in Arthur Ransome's words, "she suffered fools, for the sake of social adulation":—

"The scoffers, alas! were not few, who met at those Saturdays. Some openly laughed in the face of Lady Wilde. Whether she was conscious of that ill-bred ridicule is difficult to say, as she comported herself with the same stately dignity and hospitality to all. She possessed the supreme tact of appearing to ignore any *gaucherie* on the part of her guests, and she had the admirable faculty of appearing not to understand that which did not please her. She rarely corrected anyone, although on one occasion, when I introduced a well-known American singer, as remarkable for her vulgarity as she was famous for her wonderful voice, who had the temerity to say: 'Lady Wilde, you remind me of my dear old grandmother,' I was gently admonished not to bring her again.

"'But, dear Lady Wilde,' I stammered, in confusion, 'she is a most respectable woman.'

"'Respectable!' repeated Lady Wilde. 'Never

